

Prologue

Saturday, November 8 - 12:07 A.M.

Not much farther. She quickened her pace using the intramural softball field's chain link fence to guide her to the woods directly beyond. The light over the equipment shed fifty feet behind did not reach this far, and the moon was new, little more than a sliver. With the tree line only a few strides away, she stopped, a shiver rippling through her body.

This is totally stupid. She knew an attractive female student should not wander alone in a remote corner of the campus—especially at midnight—but she had fought too hard to give up now. She swiped a forearm, prickly with goose bumps despite the muggy air, at the sweat droplets streaming down her face.

With trembling fingers, she pressed a key on her cell phone and studied its color display. The game screen glowed with a digital map of her immediate vicinity. The white icon positioned to her right on the map, just beyond the outfield fence, made her smile. *Good. No one figured it out and got here before me. This just might give me the power I need to win the game.*

There were no red enemy icons on her screen. *Looks like no one is following me.* She rubbed the phone's display with her shirttail. *I hope this damn thing works.* She held her breath and listened for sounds of other players in the area. Nothing. She exhaled.

Okay, move, girl. A few more feet of chain link and then the woods. That's where it is. You have to go into the woods to get it.

She reached the end of the fence, and a wave of panic overtook her, almost buckling her knees. Adrenaline surged into her bloodstream, her heart rate soaring. She dropped the phone and grabbed the fence post with both hands, holding on hard against the urge to turn and sprint back to the safety of the campus.

She took deep, even breaths and willed herself to calm. *Damn it—get a grip.* She pried herself loose from the fence and flexed her aching fingers. *I guess I already had a pretty good grip.* Somehow, she managed a smile.

Squatting, she picked up the phone and brought it to eye level. Thumbing the button on the keypad again, she scanned the phone display. The map was still clear of enemy players. She wrinkled her nose at the sickening stench of body odor and sniffed of her armpit. She reeked.

Is this stupid game worth it?

She stood for a moment debating her question. Estimating she would have to go no more than thirty feet into the woods to grab the prize, she gnawed her lower lip.

Yep, I've come this far and I'm not turning back now.

She moved a dozen steps into the woods. Darkness forced her to navigate through the trees and sparse underbrush using the backlit display of her cell phone as a makeshift flashlight. She squatted next to the trunk of a large oak tree to rest and get her bearings. Surrounded on all sides by woods, it took a couple of seconds for her eyes to adjust. Twisting oak branches and

spiky palmetto fronds, which moments before her panicked mind had identified as horrible monsters, focused into harmless trees and bushes. Her racing pulse eased and she relaxed her grip on the phone.

This isn't so bad. She inhaled several deep breaths, the pungent smells of the earth and trees filling her nostrils as she listened to the rhythmic chirping of the crickets. She sponged the sweat from her face with her shirtsleeve and chuckled. *Twenty-one and still afraid of the dark, sheesh.*

Studying the electronic map on her phone's display, she determined that her current position placed her almost directly on top of the prize's white icon. She smiled. *Only a few more feet to go and the prize is mine.*

Ready to push on she stood. Her head whipped around when she heard a noise, like something rustling the fronds of a nearby palmetto bush. Halting, she listened as a fresh batch of adrenaline exploded inside her. Silence. She rewound the tape in mind and replayed the sound. *Yeah, she nodded, nothing to worry about, that sound came from deep in the woods.* But seconds ticked by and she replayed the sound again and again until she convinced herself she didn't know how far away the noise had occurred. She stood frozen for a minute, which seemed like hours, listening for further movements over the thundering sound of her beating heart.

Convinced a fallen branch must have caused the rustling, she keyed the cell phone and studied the map again to verify no other player had somehow managed to sneak up on her. The map still showed no enemy icons. *Damn it—stop acting like a paranoid wimp!* She drew in a deep breath. *This is just a silly game.*

She exhaled and took a small step away from the tree, deeper into the woods toward the prize. Just before her foot touched the ground, a twig snapped behind her. Spinning around, she flinched as the vague outline of a human figure rushed toward her.

Paralyzed, she tried to scream. But, before the sound left her throat, the lunging figure clasped the back of her neck with one hand while the other clamped across her mouth. While one gloved hand remained cupped over her mouth, the other twisted her neck, spinning her around a half turn so she faced away from her attacker. Arms flailing, she kicked backwards but failed to connect.

The hand gripping her neck slipped down around her waist, pinning her arms and cinching her body tightly against her assailant. Not able to move or utter a sound, she was as helpless as a moth entangled in a spider's web. The more she struggled or tried to scream, the tighter her captor squeezed her close. After thirty seconds of unsuccessful thrashing and kicking, she fell limp with exhaustion, guttural sobs backing up in her throat. No longer able or willing to fight back, the realization hit her—the game was over and she would probably never leave the woods alive.

Chapter One

Professor Steven Archer gazed out of his second-story office window at the deserted street and sidewalk below. The sleepy college campus had yet to come to life that warm Saturday morning. Beyond the street, in the center of a grassy courtyard, golden beams of sunlight filtered through the branches of an enormous oak tree that would later provide a shady spot for students to congregate and study. The clear blue sky, marred only by the fading remnant of a silvery jet contrail, signaled the beginning of a perfect day. The type of autumn day Floridians earned by surviving the unbearably hot and sticky summer, when the temperatures and humidity rose to well above the ninety-degree mark.

Longing for soft sand beneath his feet, the rhythmic sound of waves landing on shore, and the salty sea air that accompanied a jog down the beach instead of cooped up in his office, he sighed and resumed reviewing the thick stack of paperwork piled on his desk. He reminded himself that life would soon return to normal as his team of student programmers had nearly completed the software development project, one of the most technically challenging efforts he had ever attempted.

He scrawled a note on the project plan, pleased with the software testing to date. The student project team, some of the brightest computer programmers he had ever taught, had somehow managed to remain ahead of schedule, and, barring a catastrophe, would finish the project on time.

He smiled. *I am so proud of these kids and what they have accomplished.* They had created advanced software with complex cutting-edge technology. *No one in the industry, let alone a bunch of college kids, has ever done a project like this.* Public game testing had been extremely successful and he anticipated the test-game conducted the previous night had gone smoothly as well. He looked forward to the debriefing from his project manager at their lunch meeting later that day.

The ring of Steven's desk phone interrupted his peaceful silence. The digital clock on his desk read eight forty-four. He chuckled—the tranquility had been too good to be true. His eyebrows narrowed. If last night's test-game had encountered a major problem, he should have heard about it by now. He picked up the receiver.

"This is Professor Archer."

"Steven, it's Frank."

"How's my favorite detective?" Steven smiled—he had not spoken with Frank in several weeks.

"Not so good, my friend." Frank paused, and then continued in a more somber tone. "A female student's body was found in the woods behind the intramural softball field this morning."

"A student? What happened?"

“We’re not sure yet, but we’re treating the case as a homicide. That’s all I can tell you over the phone.” Frank paused again. “Steven, I need you to come to the crime scene right away.”

“What? Why do you need me?” Steven dropped his pen and the color drained from his face. “Oh my God, Jenny. Frank, is this about my niece, Jen—”

“Hold on,” Frank interrupted.

Steven swallowed hard, his insides revolted at the thought that this homicide might involve his favorite niece. In less than a second the detective came back on the line.

“Listen to me, Steven. I know you’re concerned about your niece, but I can’t talk with you about this over the phone. Something urgent has come up here at the crime scene and I’ve got to go. Meet me here as soon as you can and *do not* speak to anyone about this.”

“Frank, is it Jenny? Is she okay?”

Instead of an answer, Steven heard a click and then dead air.

Steven grabbed his cell phone and bolted out of his office. He dashed down the stairs, taking two at a time and exited the computer center building trying to decide if it would be faster to drive to the crime scene.

Leaving his car keys in his pocket, he sprinted across campus toward the intramural softball field. He speed dialed Jenny’s dorm room on his cell phone and got no answer. Desperate to reach her, he tried her cell phone, and again, no answer.

Steven’s lungs burned and a stitch gnawed at his side. He pumped his legs harder. Tears flooded Steven’s eyes, Jenny must be dead and Frank had not wanted to tell him over the phone. He must have called him to come to the crime scene to identify Jenny’s body.

He slowed to a jog, unable to keep up the fast pace. *This is all my fault.* After all, he had convinced Jenny to attend his university. He had promised her and her parents he would look after her. How would he tell his brother about his precious daughter? Just an eighteen-year-old freshman in college, Jenny had her whole life ahead of her.

Walking now, Steven wiped his eyes and forced himself to replay the phone conversation with Frank. Frank had never actually said Jenny was dead. *Maybe Jenny's not the victim,* he reasoned. She might not even be involved. There could be other reasons Frank had not revealed details about the body to him over the phone. Nearing the intramural softball field, he began to sprint again.

As Steven approached the woods behind the center field fence, Frank ducked under the crime scene tape and rushed to meet him. When they came together, Steven stared into Frank's eyes, unable to speak as his lungs labored to repay the oxygen debt created by his sprinting. With his left hand he clutched at his sweat-soaked shirt, which clung to his heaving chest, while his other hand swatted at the gnats buzzing around his feet and wet sandals, drenched from running across the dewy grass. Still breathing heavily, he could barely speak.

"Is she"—Steven gulped a breath of air—"Jenny . . . is she dead?"

"Steven, you need to calm down and follow me."

Steven thrust his hands on his hips and shouted, "Frank, damn it—"

"Keep your voice down and follow me," Frank ordered.

Frank led Steven away from the uniformed cops patrolling the perimeter of the crime scene. They walked about thirty feet to the thick yellow police tape tied to the outfield fence. The tape looped around the trunks of huge oak trees, and then back around to the fence. They ducked

under the tape that formed a rough circle with a diameter of about one hundred feet. A smallish body, covered by a white sheet, lay in the center of the circle.

Towering oak trees blocked out the sunlight leaving the area in shade. Because of the thick ceiling of tree branches, the white sandy ground lay barren except for thin piles of dead leaves and twigs and clumps of knee-high palmettos scattered every few yards.

A few feet inside the yellow tape, they stopped. Still struggling to catch his breath, Steven bent down and placed his hands on his knees. Frank squatted and looked Steven in the eye.

“Steven, I know this might be difficult for you, but—“

“Detective Diaz, get over here, now,” said a crime scene technician who stood over the sheet-covered body about fifty feet away. “There’s something here you’ve gotta see.”

“Stay here,” snapped Frank, pointing to the ground at Steven’s feet. Before Steven could protest, Frank dashed toward the beckoning crime scene technician.

Swearing to himself, Steven stood straight. He lifted his arms over his head, filled his lungs with oxygen, and exhaled. With his breathing almost back to normal, he wiped the sweat from his eyes and surveyed the scene.

Half-a-dozen crime scene technicians in white lab coats worked at various places inside the yellow tape. A couple of techs roamed around taking pictures. Another shot footage with a high-end video camera, taking direction from an older man in a suit, who Steven guessed to be a senior homicide detective. Much of the action centered on the body concealed by the white sheet. Frank spoke with the technician who gestured and pointed toward the trunk of a huge oak about thirty feet from the body.

Desperate to find out the fate of his niece, Steven opened his mouth to call out to Frank when the cell phone stuffed in his pocket rang.

Chapter Two

At a quarter 'til nine Bobbi Cline cut across the university campus, late for a nine o'clock meeting in the auditorium. She increased her pace to a jog, eager to continue the research on her latest article for the school newspaper. The story featured a new cell phone game that had become the hottest craze on campus. After interviewing several students who had played the new game and become hooked, she decided she would attend the orientation meeting to sign-up and play in the next game. *How can I write about something if I don't experience it myself?*

Although in a hurry to get to the auditorium, a pulse of light, barely noticeable at the periphery of her vision, caused her to halt and scan the area. *What was that?* Her instincts told her the distant flash, possibly originating from the woods, could not possibly be a normal Saturday morning occurrence. For as long as she could remember, Bobbi had been able to sense when things around her appeared slightly amiss. She hoped this intuition was part of her God-given talent for investigative journalism. She knew, more likely, she possessed a keen sense of observation and plenty of luck.

Off in the woods, behind the center field fence of the intramural softball field, Bobbi noticed a group of officials milling around. She saw intermittent flashes of white light indicating someone might be taking pictures.

From her vantage point, about a hundred yards away from the group, she could not identify the number of people in the woods or what they were doing. Stationed along the tree line and in the softball field, uniformed police officers appeared about thirty feet apart, positioned around the perimeter of the group. A steady stream of flashes, one every few seconds, emanated from the center of the action.

This must be some kind of photo shoot, maybe for a swimsuit calendar or nude modeling, she thought, *and the police are here to keep the frat boys away.* To get a better look, she walked past the bleachers and along the fence on the third base side of the softball field. As she eased closer to the action, she realized the photographers snapping pictures were not shooting a *Playboy College Girls of the Southeast* pictorial; she had discovered a crime scene.

Despite the warm sunshine, goose bumps formed on Bobbi's arms. She could now make out uniformed and plainclothes police officers as well as crime scene technicians working behind yellow police tape. The outfield fence and the large trees prevented her from observing specific details of the crime scene. *What the hell happened back there?*

She took a few steps closer to get a better look when a uniformed police officer, who looked to be only a year or two older than she was, commanded her to stop.

"What's going on over there, officer?"

"Official police business, young lady. You're going to have to move along."

Bobbi craned her neck to get a better view. "They're taking lots of pictures. Come on, what is it?"

The officer stood as tall as possible and positioned his upper body to block her view of the crime scene. When she tried to look past him, he adjusted his body position so she could not get a clear view of the scene.

“Miss, you’re going to have to move along.” He spread both arms out and, step by step, backed Bobbi away from the woods.

Bobbi rummaged through her backpack and pulled out her press card. “Look, I’m a member of the press.” She waved the card in front of his face. “I have a right to know what is going on here.”

The police officer yanked a radio out of his belt. “Sarge, this is Martin, copy?”

“Go ahead, Martin,” a voice crackled back.

“I need a hand here, over.” He continued backing Bobbi away from the action in the woods.

“Look, I just want to know what’s going on over there,” pleaded Bobbi. “I’m a reporter.”

Officer Martin grabbed the press card. Studying it, he smiled and then handed it back to her. He had backed Bobbi all the way to the sidewalk behind the softball field’s backstop. The police sergeant marched up behind Officer Martin and stared at Bobbi from behind mirrored sunglasses. Short and thick, the sergeant’s graying number two brush cut poked out of his trooper-style uniform hat. He took a deep breath, expanding his barrel chest to the point of nearly popping the buttons off his shirt, and grabbed the buckle of his black leather duty belt with pudgy hands.

“What do we have here, Martin?”

“She’s a reporter from the campus newspaper.”

Bobbi handed her press card to the sergeant. “I just want to know what’s going on over there,” Bobbi said, pointing to the crime scene.

The sergeant shook his head while scrutinizing her press card. “Ms. Cline, this is official police business.” He held her card out. “As you may know, it is our department’s policy not to comment on ongoing investigations. Seeing as you are a member of the press, you need to contact the press officer down at the station for details, which will be provided to you and your colleagues in the form of a standard department press release.” After reciting the standard press policy in a monotone voice, he looked at Officer Martin and they exchanged smiles. “You do know who that is, the press officer, don’t you?”

Bobbi snatched her card from the sergeant. “Yes, I do, and thanks for being so helpful. I stumble onto some huge crime scene, and do I get a scoop out of it? Nope. Thanks a bunch, fellas.”

Still smiling, the sergeant said, “Young lady, please move along, and have a nice day.” The expression on his face changed from a patronizing smile to a serious look of concern. “Move the perimeter back fifty yards all the way around the scene,” he said to Officer Martin.

Bobbi shaded her eyes with her left hand and stared toward the crime scene in the woods behind the outfield fence. Located behind the softball field’s backstop, she now stood too far away to see the activity in the woods. She squinted, craning her neck in a search of further clues, but from this distance, the crime scene had vanished into the thick trees. The authorities did not want anyone else finding the now hidden crime scene.

She began pivoting to head toward the auditorium when she heard a distant sound causing her to stop. Back near the woods, a man wearing shorts and sandals had yelled something. She squinted at the irate man who gestured to another man in a dark suit standing

next to him. She strained to hear the conversation, but stood too far away from them to make out their words. The man in the shorts paced like a wild animal ready to fight. He waved his arms and stared at the man in the suit with a rabid expression.

The man in the shorts looked familiar. After a few seconds, she recognized him as the computer professor in charge of the cell phone game she planned to write the newspaper story about. The man in the suit had somehow calmed the professor and the pair moved toward the crime scene.

Bobbi glanced at her watch. *Damn.* She took off running toward the auditorium.

How dare those cops give me the brush-off. Although she wrote for a college newspaper, she still considered herself a legitimate member of the press. Her idols, the *Washington Post* reporters who broke the Watergate scandal, Woodward and Bernstein, would not have let the authorities push them around like that. She had just stumbled onto something big, and the police did not want her poking around. She had not observed news vans with camera crews or print guys with photographers hounding the cops. She must have been the first media person to find the scene.

Butterflies danced in her stomach. She still had a chance to scoop the mainstream media. Identifying the well-hidden crime scene, surrounded on three sides by dense woods and obscured by the outfield fence, would be difficult, *unless you were a giant center fielder.* The thick canopy of oak trees made the area invisible from the air as well. Because of its remote location on campus, and the fact that the police had extended the perimeter, it seemed unlikely the media would find out about the hidden crime scene, unless someone tipped them off. She had to find a way to get more information about the crime scene. A story this big could help her get a dream job with a real newspaper in a major media market, like New York, Washington, or LA.

Because she had gotten close enough to the woods to identify the activity as a crime scene, the sergeant had ordered the perimeter expanded. *The cops were definitely protecting, no, hiding the crime scene from the public and the press.*

The computer professor's name was Archer, she remembered. She had already done some preliminary investigation on him for her story. Scratching her head, Bobbi wondered why he had rushed to the scene. His body language seemed to indicate a cross between shock and rage. *Could his wife or girlfriend be involved in whatever terrible thing had happened in those woods? Had the cops called him to the scene to identify a body? But, didn't they usually do that at the morgue rather than at the actual crime scene? Maybe he had been summoned there to help the police with the case. Then why did he appear so emotional?*

Unanswered questions bounced around Bobbi's mind like echoes in a cave. Seeing Professor Archer arrive at the scene gave her a leg up in breaking the story. Since the police were not giving her information, she desperately needed to talk to him. Ironically, she had already scheduled an appointment for the following week to interview him about the cell phone game for her newspaper article. Bobbi knew she could not wait until then to speak to him; she must get to him as soon as possible.

Chapter Three

The simultaneous ring and vibration of his cell phone startled Steven. He yanked the phone from his pocket and, without waiting for the caller ID data to display on the phone's screen, answered the call.

"Uncle Steven, its Jenny. I saw on my caller ID that you called earlier but you didn't leave a message. What's up?"

"Thank God you're safe." Steven's shoulders relaxed. He exhaled and looked to the sky. *Thank you, dear Lord.* "Jenny, you have no idea how good it is to hear your voice."

She laughed. "Okay, what's going on?"

"You are not going to believe my morning. I was working in my office when I got this call from—" A hand clamped down on Steven's shoulder from behind and spun him around. Frank held his index finger to his lips while shaking his head.

"Jenny, hold on a sec." Steven covered the phone. "What the hell—"

"Tell her you'll call her back," Frank commanded.

"I'm going to tell her to get out of town."

"No, you're going to tell her that you'll call her back."

“Frank, there’s a killer on the loose and I am going to warn my niece.”

“Tell her you’ll call her back or, so help me, Steven, I’ll throw you in jail for obstructing justice. Now, tell her you’ll call her back. I’m serious.”

Glaring at the detective, Steven exhaled and uncovered the phone. “Jenny, you still there?”

“Yes, what—“

“Listen, I need to call you back.”

“Uncle Steven, what is going on? Is everything okay?”

“Sure, I’ll call you later and explain everything.” He hung up the phone. “What the hell, Frank? There’s a fucking murderer on the loose and you won’t let me warn my own niece?”

“Steven, listen to me—“

“No, you listen to me.” Steven raised his voice and jabbing his finger at Frank. “If anything happens to her you better lock me up because I swear to God—“

“Don’t do it Steven. Do *not* threaten me.”

Frank’s sharp tone knocked Steven to his senses. “I’m sorry, Frank . . . it’s just that I don’t understand why I can’t simply get Jenny away from here. I don’t want to jeopardize this investigation—I just want to protect my family.”

“I understand, but you’re just going to have to trust me on this.”

Steven drew in a deep breath and then exhaled. “All right Frank, I do trust you . . . its not like I have a choice anyhow, right?”

“No, you don’t.” Frank relaxed his clenched jaw and blew out a breath. “Look, all I can say right now is this case has serious visibility within the department. High level politics are involved and the spotlight is on me to figure this mess out quickly and quietly.”

Steven bit his lip, resisting the urge to press the detective further. With Jenny thankfully alive, Steven wondered why Frank had ordered him to the crime scene.

Chapter Four

Jonathan Holden sat on the edge of the campus auditorium's stage, eyeing the partially filled rows of banked seats looming before him. He downed half a can of Mountain Dew, hoping the sugar and caffeine would give him a much-needed jolt. Rubbing his puffy eyes, he fought the fatigue plaguing his body. He knew the all night test-games, like the one he had played in the previous night, were taking a toll on his body.

The number of students filing into the large room to hear his orientation presentation and to sign up for that night's test-game excited him. Not yet nine o'clock on a Saturday morning, there must have been forty or fifty kids already congregating in the hall, with more streaming through the doors. You could not get him out of bed before noon on a Saturday when he had been an undergraduate student at the university. The game, *his game*, had become the hottest thing on campus.

He studied the groups of students, zeroing in on the females. It pleased him to see quite a few sorority girls in the crowd. *Not a bad crop today*, he thought, after noticing several hot young ones. His ties to the fraternities and sororities had helped him in recruiting students to play in the test-games. Although he had not been an active member of his fraternity since he had

graduated a year and a half ago, he had stayed close to the Greek organizations on campus throughout the development of the game. The fraternities and sororities were leaders and trendsetters on campus, and if they got hooked on the game, other students would follow suit.

Jonathan scanned the crowd again, paying particular attention to a group of sorority girls standing toward the front of the room talking and laughing. They looked like sisters, each sporting identical bleach blonde hairstyles, waif-like model bodies, and perfect smiles, which accented their gorgeous, tanned faces. One particular young blonde, however, grabbed his attention. He could not remember seeing her before—she was the type of girl that, if he *had* seen her, he would not have forgotten her.

Tall and well tanned, she wore a denim low-rise mini skirt and a white, scoop neck tank. The tiny skirt rode low on her hips and hung so short it barely served its intended purpose. Her cropped tank showed off her lean, flat stomach and pierced navel. Her natural, peach-sized breasts did not require her to wear a bra and her straight blonde hair, parted down the middle, fell over her shoulders halfway down her back. The high cheekbones, a cute button nose, and a dazzling smile accentuated her runway model-like face.