

THE CLUE IN THE BLUE BOOTH

by Hank Phillippi Ryan

I could be sitting right next to you on the subway or standing behind you in the grocery store line or waiting for my latte while you get your tea. You'd never notice me, and that's exactly how I like it.

My skill—for blending in and being ordinary—is the hallmark of my trade. The reason I get the big bucks. I'm so careful about my identity, I don't even meet my clients, but simply leave that to "Thomas," my colleague. That's not his real name, of course. I call my security company Griffin and Co., even though there's no one else, except for "Thomas," in the co. It would be nice to have someone else, but right now we're the tiniest bit strapped for cash. The "big bucks" I referred to earlier was the tiniest bit sarcastic. But we'll be fine, as long as nothing goes wrong.

I made a final adjustment to my black felt cloche as I walked closer to the massive convention center. My unremarkableness, I supposed, was the reason I was assigned to this ridiculous job.

Well, maybe not "ridiculous" so much as "waste of time," I thought as I pushed through the heavy revolving doors. Nothing would go wrong, and it was my job to make sure that was true. If by some chance something *did* go wrong, it would be my job to assess, respond, subdue, and resolve. And then instantly, as always, blend back into the woodwork.

Pausing past the bank of revolving doors, I scanned the triple-tall skylighted entryway from left to right and then back again, calculating, knowing the first-response assessment often sets the stage for what's to come. And then I almost burst out laughing.

There were no men here. And every woman looked exactly like me.

I touched the flowered silk scarf tied around my neck, and the strand of pearls underneath. It's not usually necessary for me to go undercover to blend into a crowd, because my whole life is undercover. But coming here in costume had seemed prudent, and now, surveying the lobby, the line of registration desks, and the vast convention floor, it turned out my costume was not only prudent, but hilarious. It was like being in a massive hall of mirrors.

Blond wigs—or, on some, I supposed, real blond hair—scarves

and pearls and twin-set cashmere sweaters, stockings, and sensible shoes. Plaid skirts. Some women carried magnifying glasses, and some, like me, wore little vintage hats tilted rakishly over one eye.

A fluttering canvas banner suspended from the erector-set ceiling announced why we were all dressed that way, and why we were here—not exactly why *I'm* here, of course, but why the rest of them were here. NANCY DREW CONVENTION, it trumpeted. They'd included a huge graphic portrayal of the iconic silhouette of the 1930s girl sleuth, all waved hair and cloche hat and pearls and cardigan. Just like me.

Just like *all* the attendees, because all were requested to dress as Nancy Drew. Clearly, these women followed directions. The organizers had promised a big-time surprise guest speaker, and as of now, word hadn't leaked about who that would be. Not even to me, which was somewhat unnerving. I don't like surprises.

I touched a newly pink-polished finger to my Cutex Nearly Pink lips—might as well be era-authentic. My mission was first to find booth 2583, home base of the up-and-coming Costigan Publishing Company. And make sure its new up-and-coming CEO was not— Well, no one told me exactly what they were worried might happen to this woman. Complicating things, the CEO wasn't even supposed to know I was there. Apparently she'd laid down the law about security. "We're Nancy Drew aficionados," the file Thomas gave me quoted her as saying. "Nothing is going to happen at the Nancy Drew Convention."

Famous last words. In this case, I needed to make sure she was correct. And even though the guy who came to our office had insisted to Thomas that I didn't need to know anything, well, *that* truly *was* ridiculous. Go to an assignment without some reconnoitering? Or contingency planning?

What would Nancy do?

So, doing some sleuthing of my own, I'd discovered that the fifty-something Ms. S—you might recognize the name, but I'm not allowed to reveal it—was in possession of a new Nancy Drew manuscript. Old-new, I mean. Not one of those contemporary Nancys who uses a cell phone, drives an electric car, and listens to Pandora.

Try as I had, though—and I have pretty fabulous sources—I could not uncover the title of this purported new manuscript. Obviously the teams of original Drew authors had already used diaries, clocks, staircases, mansions, dude ranches, bungalows, hollow oaks, brass-bound trunks, hidden letters, and twisted candles; and when the local dangers ran out, they sent our girl to exotic locations like Hong Kong and India and Crocodile Island.

But no matter the title, scuttlebutt predicted Ms. S would lead her company (and stockholders) to glory because she'd unearthed this truly long-lost Nancy—"Book 61" by the real Carolyn Keene, who, like me, was invisible, but who everyone at least understood did not actually exist. Carolyn Keene was a pseudonym for all the writers-for-hire who'd banged out Nancy after Nancy for ten cents a word. Or however much. Rumor had it Ms. S planned to show this Book 61 to a few selected visitors at this convention. And then sell it to the highest bidder. That had to be why I was hired, not just to protect Ms. S, but also to make sure nobody swiped the new Nancy.

Why wasn't Costigan publishing the book itself? I wasn't too up on the publishing biz, but I figured maybe there was something more to the potential deal. Possibly it wasn't so much the story as the value of the actual manuscript. Perhaps they'd decided it'd be more lucrative to sell the precious pieces of paper—it had to be paper, I figured—than to publish a certainly outdated and possibly politically incorrect book, no matter how hot the buzz or how strong the market. Maybe they thought the original Nancy publishers would pay big time for it. Maybe.

Standing in the increasingly bustling registration area, watching the lines of arriving Nancys, I wondered if everyone's name tag said Nancy Drew. I tried not to laugh about that as I adjusted the little camera I had hidden in my handbag—very Nancy, right? I made sure the camera was recording and the lens was peeking through the hole I'd cut in the side of the leather. I fussed a minute with the silk scarf I'd tied over the bag's shoulder strap, its fluttering flowered ends covering the camera lens. When I moved the scarf away, the lens was unobstructed and I was rolling on reality. If I let the scarf cover the hole, I'd only have pictures of the scarf. I was pretty good at it, though. If something happened, I would get it on tape and cross fingers the pictures were in focus. I cleared my throat, ready for action.

I heard the nonstop whiffle of the three revolving doors behind me as the time drew near for the convention floor to open. Most attendees carried empty canvas bags over one shoulder, appropriate for conveying new Nancy-loot and convention treasures. I scanned for suspicious lumps and unlikely heaviness—not every empty-looking bag was actually empty, and if someone had a concealed weapon, I needed to know that. The real Nancy had carried a little pistol in the earliest version of her adventures, until the publisher decided gun-toting girl sleuths weren't appropriate for preteens. But a dressed-up Nancy-in-disguise might still have a gun. Part of the costume, she'd explain. Until it wasn't.

But so far, no revolver-shaped bulges.

Even in my I'm-a-team-player Nancy getup, not one person had met my eyes. To be fair, maybe they were too busy checking out everyone else. The registration line was a sight—a quickly lengthening cordon of plaid skirts and Mary Jane pumps and ladylike pocketbooks. Made me wonder, briefly, if anyone else here, like me, was using her disguise for more than harmless fun and conviviality.

Because underneath the banter and costumes, I knew this was a hard-core crowd. Nancy Drew-abilia could go for big bucks. With the baby-boomer women who'd read the books as little girls now scions of industry and law and medicine and publishing, there was lots of discretionary income left after college tuitions, Botox, and splurgy shoes. How many said to one another at Pilates or in the boardroom, "Oh, I started on Nancy Drew! I *love* Nancy Drew!" Apparently the passion of Nancy Nuts (don't blame me, that's what Thomas said the guy who hired us had called them) was relentless. And the competition for collectible good stuff was fierce. "Golly," as Nancy might say.

Nancy was cool and ahead of her time, of course, with her roadster and self-confidence and self-sufficient lawyer aunt and handsome father. And Hannah Gruen, her housekeeper. I'd devoured all the original Nancys when I was twelve. I'd even caught up a bit before today, rereading online. Okay, sure, all these years later, Nancy can be a little precious. The books are all about her, her, her. And how she always had to make everything perfect. (And didn't Nancy describe her pal Bess as "plump"? Some pal you were, Nanc.) Don't even get me started on Ned, who was henpecked from page one. Still, you've gotta love Nancy. She changed our lives, and we are grateful.

Anyway, point is, I'm Nancy-savvy. And kind of Nancy-ish myself. So, perfect for this job.

They'd already sent me my convention pass, which read simply "Guest." I slid the stiff white cardboard into the pink plastic name tag holder, draped the pink strap around my neck. Scarf, pearls, hat, name tag. And hidden camera. And my own gun, of course, which was hidden in an outside pocket of my patent leather handbag. Er, camera bag. The gun couldn't be packed inside with the camera, because it had to be more accessible. Even though nothing was going to happen.

Showtime. With camera rolling and my brain on high alert, I snapped up a glossy program from a stack in a metal wire container, stashed it in the other outside pocket of my bag, and began the long walk across the marble expanse of lobby toward the

convention floor, ready to join the other Nancys.

It required all my willpower to resist the impulse to make sure my camera really was rolling. I'd checked it in the car, and out of the car, and before I arrived at the sidewalk outside. My batteries would last an hour or so, then I'd have to do a switcheroo in a bathroom stall. With all the technology we have today, we still rely on batteries. Did Nancy ever run out of batteries? Was there a *Clue in the Dimming Flashlight*? I prided myself on my hypervigilance, but it was time to let it be. The game was afoot.

I know, that's from another detective altogether.

The Clue in the Convention Center? I contemplated title possibilities for the new Nancy as I strode along a strip of bright green industrial carpeting crisscrossed in a geometrically perfect grid. At the intersection of each green street and avenue—for want of a better description—a signpost displayed the booth numbers. Left, 1000 to 2000. Right, 2001 to 3000. *The Secret of the Old Signpost?* That could work. I turned right, heading to 2583 where the mysterious (of course) Ms. S was supposedly holding court.

I arrived at 2583, the Costigan Publishing Company cubicle, and saw it was different from the others. First, most of the booths were overflowing with stuff, tabled and chaired within an inch of fire safety, plastered with posters and graphics, stacked with pamphlets and catalogs, and crowded with clear acrylic cylinders of give-away merchandise. Nancy lapel pins, enameled with her silhouette, and jewelry with rectangular charms depicting each book cover, and endless, *endless* T-shirts.

I will admit to being tempted by one of the tees. "Everything is Evidence," it said on the front. I loved that. But for me this was no time for shopping. For everyone else, though, it was. While organizers had scheduled seminars and panels, and announced a couple of new research papers being presented, "stuff" was what the Nancy Drew Convention was all about. Selling Nancy, the myth—and the merchandise.

And, of course, the long-lost manuscript. Maybe.

But the Costigan booth, 2583, didn't have any froofy decorations or commercialized Nancy-ness. Its blue drape only displayed the Costigan logo (a magnifying glass—*aha*), and the open space had a spotlessly clean (and empty) glass table and two curvy red leather chairs. No loot, no tchotchkes, no memorabilia. Costigan had snagged a high-visibility spot on the convention floor. It was at an intersection most conventioners would have to pass to get to where they were going. Weird, considering there was nothing to see and no one in the booth.

Not now, at least.

But who knew what Costigan and Ms. S had planned for later? Standing to one side of the booth, like I wasn't really interested in it, I sighed, yet again, in frustration. Would have been so much simpler if they had filled me in on their plans, not to mention their concerns. But the customer is always right. (Although I must say, not in my business. It's one of those universal truths that's sometimes not true.)

The other thing that set 2583 apart—it was double wide and double deep. I'd scrutinized the convention floor map in my program as I made my way toward it, and saw from the blue-printy sketches that the Costigan booth took up twice as much space as most. You couldn't tell from the convention floor, but the curtain backing the Costigan seating area concealed another whole cubicle. What—or who—was behind that curtain?

Clearly it was the perfect spot for private showings of the million-dollar Nancy, Book 61.

I fake-sauntered around the corner, trying to assess whether there was an opening in the curtain somewhere. Hard to tell. I fake-paused along the side of the hidden booth—*The Clue in the Hidden Booth? The Secret of the Sapphire Curtain?*—and listened, hard as I could, for voices coming from behind the heavy blue fabric. My sixth sense told me the booth wasn't empty. The way you know a house isn't empty when you open the front door, it just *felt* occupied. In this case, there was no real way to confirm that, except to listen.

But every time I thought I heard something, the blaring voice of an announcer blasted over the convention's public address system. This time, her plummy voice was making sure conventioners knew the Hannah Gruen cooking class was commencing on the pop-up stage, and the panel debating *Nancy—Role Model or Retro?* would begin in fifteen minutes. "And don't forget our surprise guest speaker," the voice boomed provocatively. "On the main stage at eleven!" I checked my watch. Ten a.m.

Whoa. I took a step forward, spooked. Someone behind me—behind the blue curtain—had coughed. I heard it, no question. And then something had moved inside that cubicle. Maybe backed up against the curtain, forgetting there was a corridor behind the cloth. So, I was right. Someone—or someones—was inside. What were they doing in there? Who was it? And how could I find out?

Had Ms. S even arrived? I'd checked her out on Google and the Costigan website and every other research resource on the Internet, but all the photos of her were blurry or bad or clearly outdated—and the Costigan site didn't have one at all. So I didn't know her,

and she didn't know me, and I didn't know if anything was supposed to happen. Or was going to happen. But in the spirit of Nancy herself, I would be persistent. Determined. I would stake out this booth until the convention day was over. Just me and a thousand other Nancys, waiting to see what adventure lay ahead.

"Nice hat."

I turned, surprised. A man. That alone was remarkable. I hadn't seen another man since I pushed through the revolving doors. He wore an official pink-strapped name tag.

"Too funny," I said, after reading it. "Ned Nickerson."

He shrugged, actually quite un-Ned in a not-very-1930s Oxford shirt and expensive jeans. Dark sweater tied preppily around his shoulders. *Reporter*, was my first thought. Except for the sweater. And he didn't have a notebook. Maybe a spy from a rival publishing company? An emissary from a potential manuscript buyer? Probably not some attending-Nancy's husband because he wasn't wearing a ring.

"Ned." I pointed to the name tag. "Really?" I was thinking two things: one, he was kind of cute. And two, he'd noticed me. In a Nancy Drew novel, Ned was a good guy, and if this were a meet-cute moment that "Ned" and I would recall years from now for our children, it'd be nicely symmetrical. But I knew life wasn't often like that.

He pulled out a little spiral notebook. "You got me," he said. His eyes were chocolate brown behind tortoise-shell glasses. "Not really Ned. But I *am* really—"

He stopped. A woman and *another* man had approached the Costigan booth and paused just outside the blue curtain. Each carried a pink-printed foam cup of coffee. "Ned" and I took a step or two away from them on the green walkway, his expression as surprised as mine must have been, and then, instantly, his reaction turned to bland disinterest. That meant he was pretending not to notice the two people who had arrived, and that was interesting. Because a person who didn't care would at least be curious. And so would a reporter.

"So what brings you here?" Ned asked me. His voice seemed a little louder than necessary. Exactly what I'd do if I were feigning disinterest in the arriving couple. Which I was. And I bet he was, too. Why?

I claimed the facing-the-booth position in Ned's and my continuing phony conversation as I focused on the woman's name tag. Ms. S. And proving her exalted station, she was not dressed as Nancy Drew. Nor was the slim, youngish man in a navy blazer who

accompanied her. He wore a name tag, too, but his I couldn't read. The two were now deep in conversation outside the booth, heads almost touching, and he seemed to be texting as they talked. Neither was holding a manuscript box or envelope or briefcase, nothing that might contain Book 61. Their postures didn't seem intimate, as much as . . . conspiratorial. But that may be just my suspicious nature.

"Oh, I adore Nancy Drew," I chirped in response to Ned's question. "Always have."

"Oh, my phone," Ned lied. He pulled a cell from his jeans pocket. Smiled, apologizing. "One moment."

Ms. S did not acknowledge me, or Ned, who was now fake-talking on his cell phone. Duh, because his phone had not rung. However, it *was* a good ploy, so I pulled out my cell, too, from where it was safely tucked in the pocket of my plaid skirt. I was proud of myself, how I'd casually managed to keep the hidden camera pointed right at my unknowing subject. Now, queen of multitasking, I kept an eye on Ned, pretended to talk on the phone, and kept my camera focused on Ms. S while I did my best detective body-recon scan, committing her face and figure to memory.

Fifty-something, gray hair bobbed in a sleek pageboy. Chunky gold earrings, chic and subtle makeup. Black dress, pearls. Name tag, not on a pink lanyard but a black one. I recognized the designer logo on her black pumps. That pair of shoes alone could pay my salary for the day. Clearly she'd ignored the dress-like-Nancy-Drew edict.

"Funny," I said into the phone. And I was thinking—*funny*. Because we don't actually know how Nancy Drew dresses. Sure, we have her style down pat for her teenage years. But Nancy Drew at fifty? Maybe Ms. S was going for that.

A few more packs of bag-toting Nancys bustled by. It was still pretty amusing to see them—*The Case of the Duplicate*, what, *Dames*? The opening panels were about to start, so any time now, the crowded convention corridors would clear. Would any Book 61 customers show up at the Costigan booth while the attention of most convention-goers was focused elsewhere?

Or maybe a customer was waiting inside. Right now. And maybe, instead of sending him—or her—away while they conferred, the CEO and her colleague had gone for coffee, and then were taking a moment in the corridor to decide whatever they were deciding.

It was all speculation, but that's my specialty, because speculation leads to problem-solving. Everyone is always trying to hide something from someone else, and everyone needs protection

from those someones. And that was me, and the background was where I liked to be. It was my favorite setting, in fact. So here I was, hiding in plain sight. Just another Nancy.

Not a minute later, with a whoosh of fabric and a clatter of heels, a blonde in a black hat barreled through the blue curtains and out of the Costigan booth. She shouldered Ms. S and Not-Ned aside, shoving the elegant woman against a metal stanchion. Head down and arms clutched across her chest, the Nancy plowed through the battalion of similarly dressed women crowded in the corridor and disappeared into the throng, swallowed up in a sea of bobbing blond heads. She'd been carrying . . . *a book-sized box*. And my heart—and head—knew it held Book 61.

Why had they left her alone with it?

In the fraction of a second I used to take it all in, Not-Ned began helping Ms. S to her feet, Ned ran after the woman, and I stepped toward the back of the Costigan booth. As the curtains closed behind me, I knew my assumption had been wrong. Running Nancy hadn't been alone. Another Nancy Drew—this one wearing no name tag—was dead on the floor with a knife in her twin-setted chest.

I pivoted, ready for pursuit. We had to find the escaping Nancy, who not only was a thief but a murderer. Plan of action: get the convention put on lockdown, keeping every single Nancy inside until we could do a lineup for identification. I paused for an infinitesimal second, picturing the array of suspects. We had quite the ID job ahead of us.

The blue curtains were yanked open, letting in the lively hubbub of the convention. Ms. S, eyes blazing, pointed toward the body on the floor as the curtains closed behind her.

“Yes. That's her!”

“Who?” I asked, stepping toward her and gesturing to the victim. “You know her? Who is this person? Someone just stabbed her! And it's the same one who ran—”

“Get back. Get away from me! What have you done with our manuscript? It's worth *millions*.” Ms. S was stage-whispering now, voice straining, jabbing a finger at me, backing up, her pearls askew, name tag flapped backward and one earring gone. She turned, pulled someone else into the cubicle. Ned.

And she pointed again. At *me*.

“That's her.” Her stress-twisted voice rose a full octave on the second word. “She's been *casing* our booth. You saw her, you talked to her. She's in on it. *Millions!* You have to—”

“No, no,” I said. Wow, did she have it wrong. “Call 911!”

Someone has to make sure no one leaves the—”

Ned was also now pointing at me. With a big black gun.

“I *am* 911,” he said. “And you’re under arrest for the murder of . . .” He paused. Glanced at the dead woman. “Nancy Drew.”

“What are you *talking* about?” I couldn’t believe this. “Nancy Drew is a *fictional character*.” More important, they should be focused on the other Nancy, the one who got away. The real murderer. I jabbed my finger toward the corridor, then looked at the CEO and at Ned. And at the gun. “You *saw* her, the woman who ran out of here just seconds ago. Didn’t you run after her? She pushed you, ma’am, and then—”

“You have the right to remain silent,” Ned was saying.

Somewhere in the convention center, readers were discussing how Nancy managed to cram a flashlight, magnifying glass, gun, notepad, compact, and lipstick in that little handbag. Somewhere else, Nancy Nuts were scarfing up T-shirts and lapel pins and scouting for the precious blue-jacketed, yellow-lettered volume that would complete their book collection. I, however, was a participant in the as-yet-unwritten *Case of the Dueling Security Guards*.

Sitting in the back room of the Costigan booth, parked on a metal folding chair and ordered not to move, I might as well have been in lockup. Turned out, Ned—Edward Elkens, he’d revealed—was, like me, a hired-gun security guard, called in by Ms. S to make sure nothing went wrong. Ned, snarking a bit, said the CEO’s assistant had apparently been “trying to help” but “clearly blew it.” Anyway, bottom line, they’d each, separately, hired a person to do the same thing. At least I now knew there *was* a new Nancy manuscript. Question was, where.

“You can’t arrest me,” I told Ned, eyeing that gun. “You’re not a cop. And anyway, I wasn’t *casing*. I’m here to do the same thing you are. I was *watching*. Just like you were. At which we have both failed because we’re both sitting here, and the Nancy with the manuscript is probably halfway to China by now.”

“So *you* say.” He wasn’t as cute as I’d first thought he was. “Why’d you let her get away? I figure you two gotta be in it together. You were the lookout.”

“You kidding me?” Now he also wasn’t as smart as I’d assumed he was. “*You’re* letting her get away.”

“Let’s see your bag,” he demanded. “And your cell phone. Hand ’em over.”

“*Kidding* me?” I said again, trying to put every ounce of skepticism possible in my voice. I knew my stuff here. A warrantless search was illegal, and he knew it, too. Plus, no way he

could get a warrant, because as he knew I knew, he wasn't even a cop. In fact, now that I was able to think a bit more clearly about it, I could just walk away. Except for Ned's—I couldn't think of him any other way—gun. Pointed right at me.

Why? They had to know I hadn't done it. My ace in the hole was that hidden-camera video I had of the fleeing thief. Ned—Elkens—had to be in league with this scam, whatever it was, since I had not *imagined* the woman in the black hat (like mine, I realized) running from the booth. The video would prove I wasn't the bad guy, but if I showed it, Ned might grab it and destroy it. I had to keep those images to myself until the real cops arrived. Sadly, the thief's image and description would be profoundly unhelpful. She'd looked just like me, as did just about everyone else in the place.

Including the corpse on the floor.

"You gonna call an ambulance?" I asked. "At least?"

"Who is she? Why'd you kill her?" Ned said. "And what did your pal do with the manuscript?"

The blue curtain parted, and the convention buzzed in again as Ms. S stepped inside with Not-Ned. And, hallelujah, they were accompanied by a real police officer. Man in blue, badge, gun, everything.

"*Millions*," Ms. S said again. Apparently they'd been discussing the missing manuscript.

"Oh, thank heaven," I said. "Officer, tell him to put the gun down, okay? Ma'am, I'm working for *you*. You just don't know it." I pointed to Not-Ned, trying not to roll my eyes too much. "Ask *him*. And anyway, I saw the murderer. And I saw who took the manuscript."

"Awesome," the cop said. "Got a description?"

"I'm afraid it's gone," Ms. S said two hours later. The CEO's icy elegance had softened and her shoulders had deflated as she sat, legs crossed and one patent toe tapping the floor, in one of the red leather chairs in the front of the Costigan booth. I stood next to her, quiet in the aftermath. The rear of the booth, with its now-stained green floor, had been sealed off with yellow crime-scene tape. Thankfully, at a convention like this, the tape was simply accepted as an appropriate and authentic decoration.

With the convention in a subtle and unannounced lockdown (conventioners only being told there'd been a robbery), and my identity (and innocence) finally accepted, all the Nancys had been escorted to the front half of the Costigan booth one by one, in the apparently plausible prospect of being auditioned for the cover of a

new Nancy novel. I wouldn't have bought that ploy for a second, and legally it was way beyond iffy, but hey, these supercompetitive Nancys believed the whole cover-girl proposition. And, unquestioningly, even happily, lined up to be scrutinized.

But, sadly, Ms. S hadn't recognized a one of them, nor had Not-Ned, and I was afraid I didn't either. Elkens was no help at all, and the two cops just stood there. Even when we watched my hidden-camera video of the escape, it was so shaky and out of focus all you could see was a blur of plaid and someone's black Mary Janes. Just like mine. So, not helpful to the cops at all. But since I was shooting the video, they knew it wasn't me who'd gone on the run.

It was clear whichever Nancy had taken the manuscript, she was—as I had predicted from moment one, thank you so much—long gone.

The convention had been allowed to open up again after the organizers (and fast-moving EMTs) had scuttled the dead Nancy out through a side entrance, unnoticed, behind a barricade of blue curtains. I decided to ignore the irony that there'd been a murder at the Nancy Drew Convention and not one of the Nancy wannabes had a clue about it.

Well, except for one. And she was, like I said, gone.

And whoever she killed couldn't reveal her murderer or even her own name. She had no identification, and her name tag said Guest. Just like mine. But guest of whom?

"I apologize, Miss . . ." Ms. S reached up, touched my arm. "We'll still pay you, of course. It all happened so fast and then—I suppose I just got it wrong. I feel so terrible, accusing you. And what makes it all the more tragic, and so silly of me, is that now the manuscript is gone."

"Yeah," I said.

"Luckily it's insured." She waved toward the now-deserted convention floor. "William's gone to call the insurance company. Of course, that's not . . . the same."

Not-Ned turned out to be William Something; I didn't quite hear his last name. The cops had questioned us all and seemed to be satisfied, but I wasn't. They'd decided someone could have gotten into the booth from the other side, which, okay, was possible. But I think I would have seen that. Still, Ms. S and her William insisted they didn't know the victim. They did not have a drop of blood on them, and the pink-cup coffee guy had given them an alibi for the time of the murder, so that was—according to the cops—enough. No one had called a lawyer.

"We'll be in touch," the police officer had said. And he left.

"Sorry for the confusion," Ned said. Mr. Understatement. And he left.

I hadn't had a bite of food in the last five million hours, so I knew I had low blood sugar, and that might account for my crankiness. But there was something big-time wrong here.

"Why'd you leave the manuscript in the booth?" I had to ask.

"We didn't *leave* it," William said. He rolled his eyes at me, like that was a dumb question. Which it was not.

Ms. S, the picture of gloom and regret, slowly shook her head. "We just went to get coffee."

The next morning, I screened my hidden-camera video again. And again. The running Nancy and the dead Nancy both looked exactly like me, which wasn't a surprise, but I mean, *exactly* like me. In fact, the dead Nancy had my exact same outfit. It crossed my mind they'd—whoever—killed her thinking they were killing me, which was scary, but didn't make any sense. But what did?

I needed to run through scenarios.

One, the two Nancys could have been in the booth together, doing whatever, and someone else came in, killed one and left. Before I got there. The second Nancy, who must have been in on it, waited for the killer to get away, then took the manuscript and ran. Dumb plan.

Okay. What if someone had killed the dead Nancy and run out, leaving her on the floor. Then the second Nancy came in, by chance, and found her. She grabbed the manuscript and was about to leave when she spotted Not-Ned and me outside, so she waited for the coast to clear. Eventually she realized we weren't leaving, so she ran out. Just as Ms. S and William arrived. Possible. But risky. And dumb.

So. What if the two Nancys were in the booth. Just the two of them. One killed the other, took the manuscript, and ran.

I sighed. Yeah. That sounded right.

And now whoever that was had a million-dollar manuscript. Still, what could she do with it? The minute it went on the market, the alarms would go out, she'd be caught, and the CEO would get her manuscript back. If that didn't happen, and some Dr. No-ish collector was hoarding it, the CEO could take solace in all that insurance money. Minus what she'd paid me and the other "security" guy. Even though we'd both blown it. *The Case of the Botched Security Job.*

I watched the video again, even though it wouldn't make a whit of difference. Neither would the convention center's in-house surveillance. All the comings and goings would be completely unremarkable.

We all looked so very much alike.

I fussed with the little label in my plaid skirt. The Dress-Up Center, it said. That's where I'd rented my whole outfit.

What would Nancy do?

It took me fifteen minutes to get there. I didn't even stop for coffee, which proves how much I thought this was a good idea.

A slouching clerk slacked behind the counter, a skinny-faced kid in a Minecraft T-shirt. Probably his first job. As I opened the door, metal bells jangled my entrance. He looked up, looked right at me, looked down again. Naturally.

I went right up to the counter, where he had to notice me.

"Returning my Nancy Drew costume." I handed it over. "It worked great," I said, all perky and appreciative.

"Cool," the kid said.

"Lot of people rent these from you?"

"Yeah," he said.

"Cool," I said. "You get them all back?"

"Huh? Yup, you're the last." He rolled my Nancy outfit into a ball and stuffed the clothing and hat into a black nylon bag.

My shoulders sagged. "Really?" So much for my brilliant idea. "Can you check again?"

"Lady. Like I said . . ." *Way too much trouble*, the kid clearly wanted to say. But he didn't. "Hang on." In passive-aggressive slo-mo, he dragged out a shoebox-sized file crammed with yellow slips of paper slotted between cardboard dividers. Fingered through the dividers. Pulled out a yellow slip. Squinted at it. "Huh. There's one still out. She only had a one-day, so she's gonna have to pay the overage if it's not in by noon."

"Bummer," I said. *Ah*. "Maybe you should call her? It'd be nice of you."

The door jangled, and a pack of T-shirted little boys, shepherded by a harried-looking mom, converged on the superhero suit display, grabbing colorful fabrics as they one-upped each other in volume and excitement.

"Dudes!" The clerk whirled, turned his back on me, and headed for the Spiderman rack. "Don't yank the latex!"

What would Nancy do? I spun the box of yellow tickets toward me, snatched the still-sticking-out one he'd pulled from the file. It was the same costume as mine, exactly. I saw the name. Saw her phone number. Memorized it. Put it back.

"Later!" I called out, though of course the clerk, now enswarmed by superhero wannabes, paid no attention. Like I said, I'm background.

I'd started dialing before I even got to my car. Voice mail:

“This is the Society of Professional Authenticators, the SPA. No one is here to take your call right now, but please leave . . .”

Which was all I needed to hear.

Yes, it was the same costume. So yes, it proved the victim was Aliana Kemper-Julian, a renowned local manuscript authenticator. And yes, when I arrived, the door of her tiny SPA office was locked and the minuscule front window was dark. And yes, it made sense this manuscript expert had been in the blue cubicle with the newfound Nancy novel. I’d left a voice-mail message for the cop on the case, mentally patting myself on the back for my prowess, knowing the police would be impressed with my detective methods.

Proud of my discovery, I went straight to the Costigan offices to tell Ms. S about it. Trying to make good, to some extent at least, on my failed mission. Even so, the CEO didn’t invite me to sit down in her tastefully taupe office. Guess I was still in the doghouse.

“Did you hire her?” I asked, standing before Ms. S’s desk. “To authenticate the manuscript?” Then I had another idea. “Oh. Was she the special speaker who was appearing at the convention? She was going to announce it with you, right? The new book?”

“I appreciate your time, Miss . . .”

She didn’t even try to hide that she was checking her e-mail. What could she be reading? Oh. *Oh. Dumb me. Now I get it.*

“Have you heard from . . . whoever has it?” I asked. I’d kept wondering what could be the point of stealing this thing. And I’d just figured it out. What if someone was holding it for ransom? ‘Whoever,’ and I didn’t know who yet, could threaten the CEO, saying *pay me to get it back, and never say a word about it, or I’ll burn it.*

That’s exactly what someone would do. And to prove it, that’s why Ms. S was ignoring me. I was on to it. Definitely. Maybe that’s even why she was focusing on her e-mail. Though no one would send a ransom note by e-mail.

“Ma’am?” I said. Very careful here, didn’t want to spook her. “I understand what might have happened. I think you have an idea where the manuscript is.”

She kept staring at her e-mail.

“If you’re thinking of paying the . . . whatever you might call it. To get it back? Remember, I’m not the police.”

The CEO tucked a strand of blonded gray hair behind one ear. “True,” she said.

I waited. Her office door opened. A slim brunette in a leopard

pencil skirt came partway in. “Your next appointment is here,” she said.

“Thanks, Cora,” Ms. S replied. She pointed to the open door. Smiled at me. “We’ll be in touch,” she said.

Dismissed.

“One more time,” I said to Thomas as I curled up in the corner of our battered old office couch an hour later. “I’m looking at this video one more time.”

“I’ll go get lunch,” he said. “You’re too cranky when you have low blood sugar.”

As the door to Griffin and Co. clicked closed, I rewound my hidden-camera video yet again. Farther back this time, to when I walked into the convention. And this time I watched Ned, on camera, coming toward me on the green-carpeted corridor. I’d been looking at the map in the program then, and hadn’t noticed him. And, of course, he hadn’t noticed me. I hit pause, thinking. And then I pushed rewind again. And play.

He’d come right out of the Costigan booth, clutching a Nancy tote bag to his chest. But in the video he was *wearing* a dark sweater. When we’d talked, he’d had a sweater tied around his shoulders, that’s what made him seem so preppy. So he must have taken the sweater off after he passed me, which was after he came out of the booth.

After he came out of the booth.

Because maybe the sweater had blood on it.

The phone rang, the jingle of an outside call. Thomas would have answered it if he had been here.

“Griffin,” I said.

“Love to chat with you about your . . . idea.” Ms. S did not identify herself, apparently assuming I’d recognize her voice. “Let’s meet somewhere private? It would have to be very secret, of course. Since what we’re discussing—the, well, you were so right about what happened. Only you know about it, correct?”

“Oh, correct,” I assured her. “I didn’t breathe a word.”

“Good.” She named a little park north of town. “See you there in thirty minutes. And come alone.”

“Of course,” I said. And hung up.

And then I did what Nancy never does. I called the police.

EPILOGUE

I probably wasn’t cut out to be a security guard anyway. The failure at the Nancy Drew convention concerned me. I mean, it had resulted in a death. Not my fault, but it haunted me. And even more

proof I wasn't right for the job: I'd been so blazingly wrong about what had happened.

Wrong because after I called the police, they surreptitiously accompanied me to the clandestine meeting. And who arrived at the park?

Not Ms. S herself, no surprise, but a slim brunette. Still in her leopard pencil skirt. Ned accompanied her. Again with his gun. Again, pointed at me.

In movies someone always explains the whole story right then, in the midst of the confrontation, but not this time. This time the cops leaped out, nabbed them both, and hauled them away. And—because as Nancy says, “Everything is evidence”—the district attorney is using my video in court.

But I didn't find out about the rest of the story. The police did. I mean, they're cops.

Anyway, my whole manuscript-for-ransom scheme, while a cool idea, was incredibly wrong. Aliana Kemper-Julian had not been about to reveal the new Nancy. She'd been about to debunk it. As phony.

When she'd threatened to reveal the Book 61 ruse to the convention, Ms. S and William regrouped, went for “coffee,” and called in their muscle, Ned, and secretary Cora as their costumed Nancy. The two went into the curtained booth. Ned killed Debunker Nancy and ducked out. But I showed up before Cora could get away.

William (Not-Ned) was the first to rat. He admitted he and Ms. S had switched to Plan B when Debunker Nancy threatened to ruin their plans. Once she was dealt with, they'd report the manuscript as missing, figuring they'd make out like a bandit on the insurance money.

Win-win. Except for that dead person thing. I'd noticed Ms. S and William being “conspiratorial.” At least I was right about that.

They'd used me as their credibility. If all had gone as planned, hiring me would be proof they'd been concerned about their valuable manuscript. When things went bad, they'd been clever enough to use me another way. As their ploy. All the while they were “interrogating” me, they were actually stalling. To let their Nancy escape with the now-burned phony manuscript.

Drives me crazy. I mean, I'd *asked* them: Why are you letting her get away? They never answered because, of course, the real reason was: we *want* her to get away.

Ms. S, sidekick William, Cora, and Ned are now behind bars, awaiting trial for conspiracy and murder and a whole bunch of other stuff.

But I was so bummed about my mistake and my inadvertent role in this thing that I decided to call it quits as a security guard and move on to my new life.

As a writer.

Now I can still get involved in murder cases, but the victim won't be real. And my invisible-me-ness is invaluable in my new career. Like I said at the beginning, I could be sitting right next to you on the subway or standing behind you in the grocery store line or waiting for my latte while you get your tea. You'd never notice me, and that's exactly how I like it.

