

Easy Marks

Carolyn Keene

Chapter One

NANCY DREW STUDIED the heavysset, balding man seated behind his wide mahogany desk. Harrison Lane was president of People's Federal Bank, one of the largest banks in the River Heights area. As he spoke—his voice confident and self-important—Nancy knew one thing for certain. He was lying.

“As a trustee of Brewster Academy, I'm very concerned that this scandal not become public,” he droned on. “That's why I've asked you here today. I've heard of your detective work, and I want you to find out who is running this transcript-changing racket and stop it before the school's reputation is damaged beyond repair.”

Nancy's blue eyes focused on the man's wedding ring, which he'd begun twisting. His hazel eyes also gave him away as not telling the whole truth. They were darting around his office, not focusing on any one thing.

As a successful amateur detective, Nancy had learned to trust her instincts about people. And Lane's body language—the darting eyes and fidgeting movements—was practically shouting to her that he was insincere. At the very least, he was withholding an important piece of information.

Nancy uncrossed her long legs and leaned forward in her chair. “I don't want to be rude, Mr. Lane,” she broke in, “but I don't think you're being entirely straight with me. Is there something you're not telling me?”

Lane's eyes widened in surprise. This was obviously the last thing he'd expected to hear. “I'm afraid you'll have to be satisfied with the information I can give you, Ms. Drew,” he sputtered.

Pulling her bag onto her shoulder, Nancy stood up and headed for the door. “I'm sorry, Mr. Lane. I just can't work that way. Without all the facts, I'd be wasting my time. Goodbye, and good luck with the case.”

Nancy had already opened the door when he called, “Wait! You're right. I haven't been completely candid with you.”

She closed the door and turned back to him. Now maybe she could find out what was really going on.

“The real reason I'm so worried about this is that—well, it involves my daughter Sally,” Lane went on in a lowered voice. He stopped fiddling with his ring and gazed squarely at Nancy. “Yesterday I discovered that she paid one thousand dollars to have her marks from last year electronically altered on the school's computer. Our culprit is getting money from these kids.

“I was making a deposit to her college fund and I saw that a thousand dollars had been withdrawn,” he explained. “When I went to use my bank card, I noticed that it wasn't in its usual spot in my wallet. Sally and my wife are the only ones who would have the opportunity to take the card, withdraw the money, and then return the card to my wallet. I confronted Sally, and she admitted she had used the money to pay someone to change her grades on the school's computer. Naturally, as her father, and as a trustee of Brewster, I'm alarmed.”

“Of course,” Nancy told him. “Do you know who she paid?”

“She swears she doesn’t know,” said Lane, shaking his head.

Nancy raised a skeptical eyebrow.

“I know it sounds unbelievable,” he went on. “It has something to do with an unsigned message on a computer—something like that. Maybe you’d better get the story from her.”

“Maybe I should,” Nancy agreed.

Nancy turned up the collar of her denim jacket as she went down the wide front steps of the bank, heading for her blue Mustang in the bank’s parking lot. It was late September, and all around her the maples rustled in brilliant shades of red, orange, and yellow.

Soon Nancy was steering her car away from downtown River Heights. As she followed the directions Harrison Lane had given her, she noticed that the houses became larger, the lawns more perfectly kept. She pulled onto Evergreen Road and stopped in front of a huge, white clapboard house with a long, glassed-in porch on the left.

Nancy walked to the door and rang the bell. She half expected a maid to answer, but instead a tall blond girl wearing a black miniskirt pulled open the door. She had the same hazel eyes as Harrison Lane. “Hi. I’m Sally. And you must be Nancy Drew. Daddy called to say you were coming,” the girl said in a high, breathy voice. “Come on in.”

“Thanks,” Nancy said, smiling politely. She followed Sally through an elegantly furnished living room and out onto the glassed-in porch. Well-tended tropical plants grew in pots all around them. “So what do you need to know?” Sally asked as they settled down on a flowered couch.

“Why don’t you just tell me the whole story, from the beginning?” Nancy suggested.

Sally nodded. “I don’t know if Daddy told you this, but I’m not exactly a brain in school. Daddy has this dream of sending me to Washburn University—that’s where he and Mom went. Anyway, with my grades, there’s no way I’ll ever be accepted there. So, when I found this message in my E-mail, I couldn’t say no.”

“In your what?” Nancy asked, confused.

“E-mail,” Sally repeated. “My computer mailbox. Brewster has this awesome new computer system. Everybody in school has their own E-mail box. We can send messages back and forth, and get school notices and homework assignments—you name it. I can even access it from here, with my personal computer, but during the day I just use the terminals at school.”

“I see,” Nancy said. “So this message turned up in your computer mailbox offering to alter your grades for a thousand dollars,” she surmised, remembering what Sally’s father had told her.

Sally nodded. “That’s right. It was last Tuesday, a week ago.”

Nancy’s eyebrows drew together in a slight frown as she said, “I don’t get it. How did you know it wasn’t a joke?”

“Because whoever sent it already knew everything there was to know about my transcript,” Sally replied. “My grade-point average, term by term, ever since ninth grade. My PSAT scores. Even the marks I got in particular courses. How could he know that much, unless he had a way of breaking into the school records? And if he could do that, I figured he could probably change the records, too.”

“Hmm. I’d like to see that message,” said Nancy. “Is it still in your E-mail?”

“Are you crazy?” Sally scoffed, laughing bitterly. “And take the chance that someone might see it? I copied down what I needed to know, then I deleted the whole file.”

Too bad, thought Nancy. Now there was no way to examine the message for clues Sally might have overlooked. “How did you pass on the money?” she asked aloud. “Was that in the message,

too?”

“Sure. All I had to do was deposit it in the person’s account. I used the quick-deposit box at Daddy’s bank. Simple!”

Nancy sat up straighter. “What about your copy of the deposit slip?” she asked. “You didn’t throw that away, did you?”

“I don’t think so,” Sally said slowly. “It’s probably still in my jacket pocket.” She jumped up and ran out of the room, reappearing soon after with the pink carbon in her hands. “One thirty-four, dash fifty-two, seventy-two, nine,” she read from the paper. “That’s the account number.”

As Sally spoke, Nancy pulled a small notebook from her bag, flipped it open to a fresh page, and copied down the number. Then she jotted down some of the information Sally had just given her. It was certainly a lucky break that the account was at Sally’s father’s bank. Harrison Lane could help her trace the owner of the account.

When Nancy looked up from her notebook, Sally was staring at her, a troubled look in her eyes. “You must think I’m a real creep, huh?” she said.

Nancy wasn’t sure how to respond. “I’m sure you’re sorry for what you did—” she began, but Sally cut her off.

“Come here,” she said, pulling Nancy back through the living room and into a study. Black-and-white photographs hung on all the study walls. “Dad on the Washburn football team,” Sally said, pointing to one of the pictures. “And here’s Dad graduating from Washburn. Mom graduating from Washburn. Mom and Dad at the Washburn University Senior Formal. Ever since I was little, all I ever heard was, ‘Someday when you go to Washburn . . .’ I just couldn’t let my parents down.” Tears brimmed in Sally’s large eyes.

“Hey,” said Nancy sympathetically. “I’m not here to judge you. I’m here to figure this thing out.”

Quickly Sally brushed away a tear. “I hope you find out who’s doing this. I bet I’m not the only one who’s been approached. If there’s anything I can do to help, just tell me.”

“Well, there *is* something,” said Nancy. “You mentioned that you can get your E-mail from Brewster on your home computer. Would you show me how it works?”

Sally nodded. “Sure, come on. The computer’s in my room.”

Nancy followed Sally upstairs to her bedroom. A yellow floral spread and matching canopy adorned the bed in the middle of the room. Over by the window was a computer desk with a PC on top of it.

Nancy watched as Sally turned on her computer, plugged the telephone into the modem, dialed the Brewster Academy number, and finally logged onto the school’s system. “There’s another message in my box,” Sally told her, stiffening.

“That’s funny. I checked my E-mail when I left school today and there weren’t any messages. This must have come in after three.”

“See what it says,” Nancy urged her.

Sally tapped a couple of keys and the screen cleared. Then lines of writing began to scroll upward from the bottom. Nancy leaned over Sally’s shoulder to read them:

Your record has been corrected. Keep your mouth shut about this. What goes up can come down. And little girls who play with fire sometimes get burned.

Chapter Two

“THAT’S A THREAT!” Sally cried, a small quiver in her high-pitched voice. “This person is turning out to be a major creep!”

“That’s for sure,” agreed Nancy, frowning. She did some quick mental arithmetic. If more students were involved, each paying a thousand dollars, then a lot of money was at stake. No wonder the grade changer was so nasty—he wanted to make sure no one threatened his operation.

“Would you print that out for me?” Nancy asked.

“Sure.” Sally hit the Print Screen button on her keyboard. The printer began to chatter, and a moment later Sally tore off the page and handed it to Nancy.

“Hmm,” Nancy said as she studied the paper. “What are these numbers across the top? I recognize today’s date, but what are the rest?”

Sally glanced at the page. “That’s the time of transmission. And see this—09.176? The 09 refers to the E-mail facility, and 176 is my box number. And that IW443 is the sender’s password. The first two letters are usually initials. I don’t know anyone with those initials, though.”

Nancy made notes next to each number as Sally explained. “How could I find out which terminal this was sent from?” she asked.

“I’m not sure. I’ll ask around and see if anyone knows,” Sally volunteered.

“Good,” Nancy said. “You were right that this message was sent after school hours. It says 4:09 here. Do you know which parts of the school stay open after three?”

Sally shook her head. “Not really. I’m not big on after-school activities. Some of the classrooms must be open, though,” she said. “There are all sorts of clubs and meetings after three.”

Still gazing at the paper, Nancy went to sit on the edge of Sally’s bed to think. After a moment she looked back up at the blonde and said, “Okay, here’s what we’re going to do. First I’m going to try to trace the bank account number. If we’re lucky, that information will lead us right to the grade-changer and the case will be wrapped up.

“If that doesn’t work,” she continued, “I’ll have to go undercover at Brewster.”

“Wow,” said Sally in an admiring tone. “Sounds like a great plan.”

“Let’s just hope it works,” Nancy told her. “In the meantime I need you to try to find out if there are other kids who’ve been contacted by this anonymous grade-hiker. Try not to be obvious about it, though. Whoever it is could be dangerous if he senses you’re trying to find out his identity.”

Sally nodded. “You can count on me.”

Nancy smiled at her. “Good.” She flipped her notebook shut and tucked it in her purse, then stood up. “That’s about it, except for one last thing. Is there anyone you suspect?”

Sally ran a hand through her blond hair. “Well . . . there is one person, but—” she began hesitantly.

“But what?”

“But he’s a real sweet guy,” Sally replied. “The only reason I thought of him is that he’s a computer whiz. His name’s Victor Paredes. If anyone could break into that computer, it would be him. He’s a senior.”

Nancy nodded, making a mental note of the name. The two girls went downstairs just as Harrison Lane was coming in the front door. After greeting him, Nancy made arrangements with

him to check out the account number. Then, after saying goodbye to Sally and her father, she left.

Twenty minutes later, as she pulled into her driveway, Nancy saw Hannah Gruen, the Drews' long-time housekeeper, rushing out the door. "What's the matter, Hannah?" Nancy called from her car.

"Nothing, dear," said Hannah, smiling warmly. "I'm spending the evening with a friend, that's all. Oh—here comes my taxi now." Hannah waved and headed down the driveway toward the cab that had pulled up. "Dinner's warming in the oven," Hannah called over her shoulder. "Eat it before it gets dried out."

"'Bye, Hannah," Nancy told her. "Have fun."

Going inside, Nancy saw that there was mail on the low table in the entrance hall. Most of it was for her father. But Nancy felt her heart skip a beat when she came to a letter with familiar handwriting. A letter from Ned!

A tingle ran through her as she took it up to her room to read it.

Ned Nickerson, Nancy's boyfriend, was away at Emerson College. This was the first letter she'd received from him since he'd returned to school from summer break. It wasn't a very long letter—just news about classes and his friends. But the part at the end about how much he missed her made Nancy resolve to visit him soon.

She settled back against the pillows on her bed to write him back. By the time she was done, her father had come home and it was time for dinner.

Over baked chicken with chestnut stuffing, Nancy told her father about her case. Carson Drew had a respected law practice in River Heights and was often a help to her.

"I'm not sure if other kids are involved, or if Sally was singled out. And what makes it especially tricky is that changing a grade in a computer file doesn't leave any trace," she concluded, spooning a second serving of stuffing onto her plate. "You can't examine a floppy disk for erasure marks or analyze how old the ink is, the way you can with something on paper."

Her father smiled. A distinguished-looking man in his forties, he had dark hair that was flecked with gray at the temples. "Don't I know it! A few years ago, people were talking about the 'paperless office' that computers were supposed to create. But I probably use more paper in my practice now than I did before we computerized. We print out every version of every document we draft, so that if any problems come up we can pull the file and put our finger on the exact bug. I'm surprised that Brewster Academy doesn't do something of the sort as well."

"Maybe they do," Nancy said. "But I don't know about it. I hope I don't wind up having to go over a ton of paperwork to check which grades have been changed," she added, sighing. "But if that's what it takes, I'll do it. I'd rather catch this hacker by checking the bank's information."

"*Hacker*," Carson Drew repeated. "What a funny word that is! I remember the first time I heard it. It was six or seven years ago. A high-school girl here in River Heights managed to figure out how to monkey with the billing on the telephone company's computer."

"Uh-oh, I think I see what's coming," Nancy guessed. "She had a boyfriend in Tokyo, right?"

Her father smiled. "Not exactly, but you aren't far from wrong. At summer camp she had gotten to be very close friends with her counselor, who was also from River Heights. But in September the counselor went off to college on the West Coast. The girl was having some emotional problems, I gather. She got into the habit of calling her former counselor two or three times a week and talking to her for an hour or more at a time."

"Sounds like a pretty expensive habit," Nancy remarked. She scooped up the last of the chicken with her fork and popped it into her mouth.

“Eventually it was,” Carson replied. “But for several months, she managed to, ah, hack the telephone company computer and erase the calls from her parents’ bills. Apparently she was very clever about it, too. The telephone company had quite a job catching up with her.”

“And when they did?” Nancy asked.

Her father leaned back in his chair. “Her parents asked me to step in and deal with the telephone company. I talked them into settling for the amount they were owed on the calls, plus a detailed explanation from the girl of how she had broken into their system and altered the bills. They needed that even more than the money, you see. Otherwise, someone else might have come along and found the same weak point in their security. I understand their computer experts were very impressed by the girl’s skills.”

“So she didn’t end up with a police record or anything like that?” Nancy said with a laugh. “She was lucky to have you for a lawyer!” She stood up and collected the plates from the table. “Hannah left fruit salad in the fridge. Want some?”

“I think I’ll pass.” Her father stacked the serving dishes and followed Nancy into the kitchen with them.

“Whatever happened to the girl?” Nancy asked. “Did she go on to be a computer crook or a computer genius?”

“Genius, I think,” her father answered, laughing. “I remember hearing that she started her own computer company right here in town.”

Nancy paused with a plate in midair between the sink and the dishwasher. An idea had occurred to her. “You know, I might need to consult someone like her if I get in over my head in terms of computer know-how. What’s the woman’s name?”

“Can’t tell you. Sorry, honey,” replied her father as they stacked the dishwasher together. “That’s privileged client-lawyer info.”

“Dad!” Nancy moaned. “I can just go to the library and look it up in a newspaper.”

Carson Drew grinned. “I was able to keep the story out of the papers. You could try, but it wouldn’t do much good.”

“You’re a great lawyer, Dad,” Nancy told him, laughing. “Too good!”

There was a teasing glint in his eyes as he said, “I am, aren’t I?”

Nancy checked her watch as she approached the front door of People’s Federal Bank—ten minutes to nine. The bank wasn’t open yet, but Nancy saw through the heavy glass doors that Harrison Lane had spotted her. Holding a large ring of keys, he opened the door from the inside and let her in.

“I have some information for you,” Lane said in a low voice. Behind him, tellers and bank officials were getting ready to start the day. Some of them glanced at Nancy with mild curiosity, but returned to their business right away. “That account you asked about—it’s in the name of I. Wynn.”

“I. Wynn?” Nancy repeated, breaking into a laugh. “Get it? I Win—You Lose,” she explained when she saw Lane’s questioning look. “It’s obviously a fake name, don’t you think?”

Lane shook his head. “It’s real. We checked it against the Social Security number the person gave.”

Suddenly Nancy remembered the initials in Sally’s message-sender’s password: I.W.! “Can I speak with the bank official who opened the account?”

“Certainly.” Lane ushered her over to one of the customer service desks, to the left of the long tellers’ counter. A slender African-American woman in her thirties sat behind the desk. She

smiled at Nancy as Harrison Lane introduced Nancy and explained what she wanted.

“Mrs. Tillman here opened the account. I’ll let her tell you the rest,” said Lane, leaving them.

“Do you remember what I. Wynn looked like?” Nancy asked as she settled into the chair beside the desk.

“I certainly do. It was about ten days ago. She was a strange-looking little thing—”

“She?” Nancy interrupted.

Mrs. Tillman nodded. “Oh, yes. A dark-haired girl, about your age, maybe a little younger. Her skin was very pale and her hair was jet black. It looked dyed. Perhaps it was a wig.”

“And you say she was small?” Nancy prompted.

“Yes, very petite, and nervous. But, you know, I figured she was just a kid. It’s easy to be nervous in a big bank like this. Her information checked out—at first, anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

Mrs. Tillman opened the desk’s file drawer and flipped through the manila folders, pulling one out. Nancy could see the name I. Wynn written across the top. “Well, like this, for instance,” Mrs. Tillman told her. “The previous bank reference she gave was for a savings and loan company in Texas. There is such a place, but it folded a few months ago.”

After consulting the file again, Mrs. Tillman added, “She used her Brewster Academy student ID for signature verification.”

Nancy nodded. “Do you have an address for I. Wynn?” she asked.

Mrs. Tillman punched some numbers into the computer terminal on her desk. “Fourteen twenty-one Sycamore,” she read off the amber writing on the screen. “She opened the account with one hundred dollars. Ninety-five of it was withdrawn from a machine two days later. A few days after that a thousand dollars was deposited in cash. That was all withdrawn the day after that.”

Nancy looked over Mrs. Tillman’s shoulder to check the dates. The thousand dollars had been deposited the previous Tuesday—exactly when Sally said she’d made her deposit. There were three other similar deposits and withdrawals. It seemed as if Sally was not the only student the grade-changer had contacted.

“Were all these transactions done at a cash machine?” Nancy wanted to know.

“Two different cash machines—one located at Archer Avenue, the other at Ivy Avenue,” Mrs. Tillman confirmed.

Both those branches were quite close to Brewster Avenue, where Brewster Academy was located, Nancy noted. “Thanks very much,” she told Mrs. Tillman.

Ten minutes later Nancy turned her car onto Sycamore Street and began looking for number 1421. The neighborhood was run-down and deserted. Most of the houses were faded and sagging, as if they were simply waiting for a good excuse to collapse. Scraps of paper and debris littered the branches of the scraggly bushes lining the cracked sidewalk. There were only a few cars parked along the curb, but Nancy had a feeling that few, if any, people actually lived there.

She parked in front of the address Mrs. Tillman had given, then took a long look at the place. If the other houses on the block were neglected, this one looked flat-out abandoned. She was tempted to leave. Still, it *was* possible that the house held some clue to the identity of I. Wynn. She had to check it out. After taking a flashlight from the glove compartment, she got out of her car and walked up to the front door to ring the bell. No one answered.

Nancy’s blue eyes focused on the door’s heavy padlock. Maybe she’d find an easier way in around back. Before going, she grabbed the padlock and gave it a yank, to make sure that it was

locked. To her surprise, the screws that held the hasp to the doorframe pulled right out of the rotted wood. The door swung slowly in, as if inviting her to enter.

Glancing over her shoulder to reassure herself that the street was deserted, Nancy took a quick step inside and pushed the door closed behind her. Then, rumbling with the switch on her flashlight, she started forward in the gloomy hallway.

Suddenly, with a loud crack, the floor under her feet gave way. Nancy let out a gasp as she felt herself falling through space!

Chapter Three

INSTINCTIVELY, Nancy flung her arms out to the side. She let out a cry of pain as her hands and forearms slammed against the floorboards an instant later.

Her arms felt as if they were about to snap in two, and the splintery edges of the broken boards were digging painfully into them through the denim of her jacket. Her legs flailed uselessly below her, but the worst pain was in her shoulders. Nancy felt as if her weight were about to pull her arms from their sockets.

Gritting her teeth, she moved her legs carefully in every direction, groping for anything that might give her extra support, but there was nothing. If her arms slipped, she was bound to fall!

Okay, Drew, think. What if you let yourself down and hang full length by your arms, then drop to the basement below? She glanced nervously down into the murky darkness, imagining the jumble of sharp-edged pieces of machinery or nail-studded boards she might land on. No, the only sensible way out was upward.

Nancy tried using her arms to push herself up out of the hole, but after half a minute, she gave up. She didn't have enough leverage.

Looks as if I'll have to come up with plan B, she thought. Taking a deep breath, she let it out slowly and began to pull her right knee up toward the floor. Her aching arms felt as if they couldn't hold on much longer, but soon the toes on Nancy's right foot were touching the underside of the floorboards. With one last effort, she turned her foot to one side and pulled it toward her. It just barely cleared the far edge of the hole.

With a loud sigh of relief, Nancy extended her leg onto the floor and let it take some of the strain off her arms and shoulders. She rested that way for a few moments, then pulled her other leg up and rolled cautiously to one side. If there was one weak spot in the floorboards, there might be others.

Just above her head, a little daylight filtered in through the dusty windows on either side of the front door. Nancy spotted her flashlight in a corner next to the door. She crawled over and retrieved it, then got carefully to her feet.

Beyond the yawning hole, the floor of the hall was thick with dust. A few pieces of old furniture kept the place from being completely empty. Nancy decided it was too dangerous to investigate the house. She'd have to find out about I. Wynn some other way.

Nancy squinted in the sunlight as she stepped out onto the rickety front porch. For the first time she noticed a small nameplate on the side of the doorframe opposite the bell. On it, the name *Ignatz Wynn* was written in small, shaky handwriting. Ignatz, huh? thought Nancy. That was hardly a girl's name. What was the story here?

She checked the mailbox that was nailed to the porch railing, and discovered a letter. It was from the People's Federal Bank, a bank statement from the look of it. It had been mailed only a

few days earlier. Nancy put it back into the box. There was no need to read it; she'd already seen the transaction records of the account.

A movement in the house across the street caught her eye. Someone had parted the Venetian blinds and was peering at her through the slats. In the next instant the person was gone.

Crossing the street, Nancy knocked on the door of the house. No one answered, so she rapped harder. Slowly the door opened, just enough for Nancy to see a short, gray-haired woman in a worn housedress. "What?" the old woman snapped, gazing up at Nancy suspiciously.

"Excuse me, but I was wondering if you could tell me something about Mr. Wynn?" Nancy asked.

The woman's blue eyes narrowed. "Who wants to know?"

"I'm his niece," Nancy told her, mentally crossing her fingers.

The woman's face softened a bit, and she opened the front door wider. "Well, I hate to tell you this, honey, but your Uncle Iggy passed on. He just lay down one night and didn't wake up. It was a peaceful death, I guess."

Nancy's mouth fell open. "You mean, he's—dead?" *That* was news!

"Has anyone—I mean, anyone *else*—in his family been by?" she inquired after a moment.

"I didn't know he had any family," the woman told her. "I saw a woman come by one day. And a man the next. But I don't know who they were."

"Was the woman small?" Nancy asked. "That would be my cousin, Marie," she added quickly.

"This was someone else, then. She was kind of fat. The man was on the tall side. I didn't get a good look at them. I mind my own business."

Nancy smiled to herself at this last remark. "Do you know what's going to happen to the house?" she asked.

The old woman snorted with laughter. "Sure I do. The government is taking over ownership. Iggy owed so much on back taxes that the state owns that house for sure. They were trying to blast him out of there for years, but he wouldn't go. Bless that stubborn old wino. He wasn't budging."

Nancy nodded.

"How long ago did—uh, Uncle Iggy die?" she asked.

After thinking a moment, the woman replied, "Two weeks ago. It was in the paper and all—just a single line crammed in with all the other unimportant dead folks' lines. Wasn't like they put his picture in or anything."

"That would explain it," murmured Nancy, thinking out loud.

"Explain what?" asked the woman, raising an eyebrow.

"Huh? Oh—nothing. Thank you very much for talking to me," Nancy said hastily. "I've got to be going."

The woman nodded and shut the door.

Nancy's mind was racing as she headed back to her car and slipped behind the wheel. The real I. Wynn didn't have anything to do with this scam, she realized. The culprit must have picked the name from the obituary column. It was perfect. Ignatz Wynn had no relatives, according to the woman across the street, and his house was empty. How had the culprit learned Wynn's Social Security number, though? That was a mystery for now.

Nancy drummed her fingers against the steering wheel as she pondered another question. Who were the man and woman? They could be in on the grade-changing scheme. Or they could be real estate people or officials from the state. The only thing she knew for sure was that neither

of them was the petite girl who had opened the account as I. Wynn.

Starting up the engine, Nancy headed for home. The muscles in her arms were throbbing. She was sure she had some cuts and bruises that should be taken care of, too. She let out a sigh. This case wasn't going to be as easy to solve as she had hoped. Her culprit was very clever.

Time to go undercover, she decided. It looked as if she wasn't going to visit Ned at Emerson this weekend.

By four o'clock that afternoon, Nancy had taken a long, hot bath and rubbed ointment on the scratches on her arms. Still wrapped in her bathrobe, she picked up the phone on her bedside table and called Sally Lane at home. After saying hello, she asked, "Can you think of a believable reason for me to be hanging around the school, asking questions?"

After a brief pause, Sally's high-pitched voice came back over the line. "What about the new tutoring program? That could work. One of the tutors just dropped out, and they're looking for a replacement."

"That'd be perfect," said Nancy. "The kids who need tutoring are likely to be the same ones who'd want their grades changed. Do you think your father can get me into the program?"

"No problem. I'll talk to him tonight."

"Okay, call me back when you've spoken to him. Thanks for your help, Sally," Nancy told her. "And remember, don't talk about this with anyone."

"My lips are sealed," Sally assured her.

The next morning Nancy parked her Mustang in a visitor's slot in the Brewster Academy parking lot and got out. She smoothed her red, black, and white plaid skirt and straightened the collar of her white blouse, then retrieved her attaché case from the back seat. She wasn't sure what a tutor might wear, but she hoped she looked the part.

Brewster Academy was a two-story gray stone building, with slate-colored shingles and two massive chimneys on either side of the roof. It looked as if it had escaped from a print of a New England town. The school was beautiful, but that didn't change the fact that something very ugly was going on there.

One of the front doors opened, and Harrison Lane stepped out on the top step. He'd called her the night before to tell her that everything was set, and she'd brought him up to date on what she'd learned about I. Wynn. Now, spotting Nancy, he waved.

"There you are," he said as she walked up to him. "I've been waiting for you. I just had a word with Walter Friedbinder, our new headmaster. He's arranged everything."

Lane led her inside and down an echoing hallway to a door with Administration painted in gold on the frosted glass pane in its upper half. Inside was a small anteroom with a desk, a waiting area, and a couple of file cabinets. Through a doorway to one side, Nancy caught a glimpse of an elaborate-looking computer setup.

The woman at the desk raised her head and said, "Please go right in, Mr. Lane. The headmaster is expecting you." Nancy noted her nameplate: Ms. Arletti.

Nancy had been expecting the headmaster to be a gray-haired man, perhaps with a trim mustache, but Walter Friedbinder was young and athletic looking, with short-cropped, reddish hair and intense blue eyes. He sprang up from his desk as they entered his office.

"Welcome to Brewster Academy, Ms. Drew," he said, offering his hand. "It's nice to have you with us."

"Thank you. And please call me Nancy," she said. "But maybe I'd better use the name Nancy

Stevens around here. My name has been in the papers, and it might be best if no one knows I'm a detective."

"Of course," said Friedbinder, the smile fading from his face. "I hope you can help us. As I'm sure Harrison told you, this is my first year at Brewster. I accepted the position as headmaster because I admire Brewster's progressive educational system. The thought that the school might be ruined by a scandal makes me sick."

"I'll do what I can, Mr. Friedbinder," Nancy told him.

His smile returned. "Please call me Walter. We try to keep things informal around here."

He returned to his desk and picked up a file folder. "I think you'll find whatever you need to know about the tutoring program in here," he said, handing it to Nancy. "Now, why don't we go next door and I'll introduce you to my assistant head, Phyllis Hathaway. She can take you down to the learning lab and get you settled in."

"I've got to be off," Lane told them, checking his watch.

Just as they left the headmaster's office, the door across the anteroom swung open. An attractive woman with dark hair pulled back in a French braid came out. She was about thirty years old and stylishly dressed in a black linen dress.

"Why, hello," Lane said. "It's been a long time. How are you?"

The woman gave him a surprised look, then smiled politely and said only, "Fine."

There was an awkward pause, then the banker said, "Well, goodbye, everyone," and left.

Walter urged Nancy across the room.

"Phyllis," he said, "this is Nancy Stevens, who is joining the tutorial program. I said you'd help get her squared away."

Nancy was glad that he'd remembered to use her alias. The fewer people who knew her true identity, the better.

"Hi, Nancy," the woman said. "I'm Phyllis Hathaway. Come into my office. I'll tell you a little about the program, then we can go down to check out the classroom where you'll be working. Have you done much of this sort of work before?"

Walter rushed to answer before Nancy could reply. "Nancy has excellent qualifications," he said, his voice harsh and impatient.

Phyllis's expression hardened. "I'm sure she does," she said in a clipped tone that clearly said, "Mind your own business."

The headmaster's face reddened, but he didn't say anything more. Instead, after another awkward pause, he said, "Well, I'll leave you to it. Nancy, if you need anything, just let me know."

He disappeared into his office, and Nancy followed Phyllis into hers.

"I hope that didn't make you uncomfortable," the woman said apologetically after they were seated. "I've been at Brewster for a number of years, ever since I finished college out in California. But Mr. Friedbinder is new to the place. We're still learning to work with each other. I guess we're experiencing what's called a personality conflict."

"That happens, I suppose," Nancy murmured. She glanced around the office. Half of Phyllis's desk was taken up by the high-powered computer work station Nancy had glimpsed before. The bookcase behind Phyllis's chair seemed to be filled mostly with software manuals and books on computer programming.

"I've heard that the school has a very advanced computer system," Nancy remarked.

Phyllis beamed. "It certainly does—the most powerful of any high school in the state. We're very proud of it, and I'm especially proud because I was able to help design it. I'm sure you'll

enjoy using the system, too, once you get the hang of it. Now, here's what we hope to accomplish with the new tutoring program. . . ."

As Phyllis spoke, Nancy realized that this case was going to be a challenge in more ways than one. In addition to unmasking the grade-changer, she was going to have to help students with their English, history, and social sciences. It sounded as if she was going to have to do a lot of homework herself!

"That's the plan in a nutshell," Phyllis concluded. "Now, why don't I give you a quick tour of the place?"

They were getting to their feet when the telephone rang. "Excuse me a moment," Phyllis said, reaching for the receiver.

Nancy stepped just outside Phyllis's office and waited. She was reading her notes and thinking over her approach to the investigation, when suddenly a phrase caught her attention.

"—too dangerous," Phyllis was telling the caller. "Listen, Dana, I don't like him any more than you do. I'd love to see the conceited nitwit squirm, but I'm not sure I want to go any further with this. Yes . . . okay . . . maybe I *am* getting cold feet. But this could really hurt Brewster. I know . . . I know . . . the financial rewards are compelling. And I really do need the money. Let's just take it more slowly. This plan has the potential to end in disaster."

Chapter Four

NANCY EDGED AWAY from the office door. She didn't want Phyllis to guess that she'd overheard any of her conversation.

It looked as if Nancy had another suspect. Phyllis had a motive—apparently she needed money, though Nancy didn't know why. And who was it she wanted to see squirm? Maybe Friedbinder, considering their strained relationship. A grade-changing scam would accomplish both things. Phyllis had the opportunity, too. Who would have better access to the school's computer than she?

There was only one catch. Phyllis was tall and elegant. Even in a disguise she wouldn't fit the description of the petite I. Wynn—or of the woman who'd been seen at I. Wynn's Sycamore Avenue address. But maybe that was where this Dana person came in.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Phyllis said, coming out into the anteroom. "Now let me show you the learning lab."

Nancy and Phyllis took the stairs up to the second floor. Using a key, Phyllis unlocked the door and ushered Nancy into a small room with a teacher's desk, four student desks, and a folding table that held a telephone, computer terminal, and a small printer.

"Once in a while you may have to share this room with Mickey Randolph—he's the other tutor," Phyllis told Nancy. "His specialty is science and math. Unfortunately he's out of town for the next few days, though. A relative passed away."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Nancy said. In more ways than one, she added to herself. Randolph might have information that would help her.

"Yes, well, here is some background on each of your students," Phyllis continued, handing Nancy a manila folder she took from the teacher's desk. A schedule was taped to the top of the folder. "Let me give you a password so that you can use the computer, too."

Phyllis found a scrap of paper on a desk and wrote out a code.

"NS four forty-four," Nancy read when Phyllis handed her the paper. "What does that stand

for?”

“Nancy Stevens, four hundred and forty-fourth password,” replied Phyllis. “I’ll load it into the system when I get back to my office. You’ll be able to use it right away.”

“Thanks,” said Nancy as Phyllis left. She sat back down in a student’s seat and thought. Sally Lane’s message had been sent by IW443. Four forty-three was the last password entered into the system before Nancy’s. That could mean that the grade-changer was someone who hadn’t been at the school a long time. Or it might mean that the person had two passwords and had assigned himself or herself the I. Wynn password without the school’s knowledge.

Yet Phyllis was aware of the number of the last assigned password. It must be in her records. Did she know who was using it? Was Phyllis, herself, using it?

Nancy’s thoughts were interrupted when her first student arrived. He was a tall, awkward boy named Dan. “I don’t see why we have to learn this stuff,” Dan mumbled as Nancy opened the history book. “These geeks are dead, man.”

Nancy could see that she had her work cut out for her.

Her next two students weren’t much easier. One was a girl with short red hair who needed help in English. Apparently, she had never bothered learning much spelling or grammar because she had Spellcheck and Grammarcheck on her home computer.

The other one was a girl who was failing history. She admitted to Nancy that she’d been caught writing her reports from miniseries on TV.

To each of the three students, Nancy asked the same leading question: “Wouldn’t it be great if you could somehow change your old grades now that you’re going to start doing better?” She asked it casually, with a smile, but her blue eyes scrutinized their faces for any trace of reaction. All three students agreed it would be wonderful, but Nancy didn’t note any signs of guilt or nervousness.

Nancy glanced at the name of her fourth and final student before lunch. Victor Paredes. He was the guy Sally had named as the computer whiz, she recalled. Apparently he needed tutoring in English.

There was a tap on the open door. Nancy looked up and saw a guy standing there, grinning at her. He was very good-looking, tall and broad shouldered, with light brown, almost amber eyes, and dark brown hair.

“Hi, Teach,” he said.

“Hi, Stu,” she retorted. “Come on in.”

Nancy looked over the sheet that detailed what he was supposed to work on, then got down to it. Victor was very quick, but it was obvious he had never bothered to spend more than two minutes on English grammar before. Now that he *was* bothering, he caught on easily.

“If any of my teachers were as pretty as you, maybe I would have paid more attention to this stuff,” said Victor, gazing into Nancy’s eyes.

“With lines like that I’m surprised you *didn’t* get better grades.” Nancy laughed, trying to deflect his flirtation.

At the end of one of the exercises, Nancy said, “Now, that wasn’t hard, was it? It’s too bad you can’t go back and change last year’s grade in English, now that you know how to do the work.”

“Who says you can’t?” Victor replied. “I could, if I wanted to.”

Nancy started, then caught herself and said lightly, “Don’t be ridiculous. Your grades are in your permanent file.”

“Sure,” said Victor, flashing her a dazzling grin. “And my permanent file is in the school

computer, along with everybody else's."

Nancy fought to keep cool as she said, "Yes, I know. But you need special access codes to get to them, don't you? Otherwise, people would go around giving themselves whatever grades they wanted." She held her breath and waited to hear what he would say.

"There are ways to access those codes," Victor replied. "You'd have to be really smart to figure out how. But I could."

Nancy laughed. "You're not big on modesty, are you?"

Pink spots bloomed on Victor's cheeks. "Well, I don't want you thinking I'm dumb just because I bombed out in English," he told her. "I mean, being smart is sort of attractive, isn't it? And I want you to see my good side."

Again, Nancy tried to ignore his flirting, though she couldn't help being charmed by it a little, too. "You mean, you've figured out how to get into the locked files in the school computer?" she asked, trying to get the conversation back on track. "That's pretty amazing—if it's true."

"It's true, all right. Here, I'll prove it to you." He went over to the terminal and turned it on. "Let's see, what would light a fire under the honchos in the big office? Hey, I know!"

Nancy looked over his shoulder. His fingers were moving over the keyboard too quickly for her to follow, but on the screen she saw a demand for a password, then a directory of files. Apparently, Victor had somehow figured out how to get past the security codes and break into the system. The glowing cursor moved down the list of files and stopped at one named HEADMAST.BIO.

Victor pressed a couple of keys. The screen cleared, then filled up with Walter Friedbinder's biography.

"Now, what should we do with him?" Victor started typing again. Every now and then he gave a little snort of amusement. Finally, he turned on the printer, printed out the document, and handed it to Nancy. She started reading.

Walter "Twinkletoes" Friedbinder, the new headmaster of Brewster Academy, has one of the largest collections of soda bottle caps in the United States. He has earned degrees in both Fahrenheit and Celsius and is a founding member of River Heights's Flat Earth Society. Dr. Friedbinder's research into loose-leaf notebooks and the effects of heating them in oil led to his famous discovery of the fried-binder. . . .

Nancy laughed. "Victor, what have you done?" she cried, trying unsuccessfully to scold him. "This is terrible!"

He pretended to be hurt. "I thought it was pretty good for the spur of the moment."

"But—but what if somebody sent this out, without noticing the changes you made? Mr. Friedbinder would probably fire them!"

"No problem, Nancy." Turning to the keyboard, he entered a couple of commands. "There, I've restored the original version. I'll show you."

The printer began chattering again. When it stopped, Victor ripped off the page and handed it to Nancy. Scanning it quickly, she saw it was a straightforward, unaltered press release about Walter Friedbinder. She folded the two pages and put them in her shoulder bag.

"Very impressive. Can you really get into any file in the school computer?" she asked. "Even stuff like student records?"

"Just about," Victor boasted. "Figuring out the access codes is my hobby, the same way some guys customize cars, or play video games, or collect weird road signs."

Nancy shook her head. "Aren't you running a big risk, though? Changing people's grades is really asking for trouble."

"Wait a minute," he said, holding up a hand. "I never said I *was* changing grades, just that it wouldn't be that hard to do." He pointed toward the file folder on the desk. "If I was into changing grades, do you think I'd still have that D from last year's English class on my record?"

"That's a point," Nancy conceded. She was about to ask Victor more questions, but the bell in the hallway started to ring.

"Wow! I can't believe it's lunchtime already." Victor turned off the terminal and gathered his books. At the door, he looked back. "Thanks for the English lesson," he said. "I actually understood some of it. Hey, could I interest you in getting a burger after school? With me, I mean. My treat."

Nancy thought quickly. Victor might well be behind the grade-changing scheme. Even if he wasn't, he seemed to know more about the computer system than anyone else around. "Okay."

"All right! I'll meet you in the parking lot around three." He flashed her a quick grin, and then he was gone.

Nancy found herself smiling. She couldn't help liking Victor, so far. In the past she'd learned the hard way that—well, even bad guys could have charming smiles.

All the students were probably down in the lunchroom by now. This would be a good time to check out some of the other classrooms.

Nancy shut the door to the learning lab behind her. Checking each classroom, she made her way down the second-floor hallway.

Half the school was on the first lunch shift, so many of the classrooms were empty. Nancy was looking for rooms with computers, places where the mysterious E-mail message might have been sent from, and also a place where the hacker—if it turned out to be a student—could sit, undisturbed, to work his or her grade changes.

Suddenly she stopped. Alone in a classroom with three computers was a short, petite girl with shoulder-length dark hair held back with a headband. She sat working on one of the computers. When Nancy's shoe scuffed the floor, the girl jumped and turned around anxiously.

"Oh! You scared me!" she cried, seeing Nancy in the doorway. The girl wore an oversize purple sweatshirt over loose-fitting corduroy pants. Her surprised expression quickly changed to one of annoyance as she asked, "Are you looking for something?"

"Just checking out the building," Nancy told her. She introduced herself as Nancy Stevens and explained that she was the new tutor at Brewster. As Nancy spoke, the girl hit a few computer buttons and closed out the file she'd been working on. Was she finished, Nancy wondered, or was she hiding what she had been writing?

"Catching up on homework?" Nancy asked pleasantly.

"Not quite," the girl said curtly. "My name's Randi Peters. I'm the editor of the *Academician*." She was clearly impressed with her title. "I'm working on an article for the paper. Hey, how about being interviewed?"

Nancy blinked. Had her cover been blown already? "Interview me?" she said cautiously. "About what?"

"About the tutoring program, of course," Randi said. "I haven't done a story on it yet. I think it's a natural, don't you?"

"Sure," Nancy agreed quickly. It was perfect—only Nancy hoped *she* would be the one getting useful information. "But I don't have my schedule on me. I don't know when I'll be free. I'll have to call you."

Randi smiled. "Okay. See you soon, then."

Nancy said goodbye and returned to the learning lab for her afternoon tutorials. After her last student, she met Victor in the parking lot and followed his battered old green sedan to the Roost, a hangout a few blocks from Brewster Academy.

The place was just beginning to fill up. Nancy nodded to Sally Lane, who was sitting with friends in a nearby booth. With a quick tilt of her chin, Sally quietly acknowledged the greeting. Nancy looked around, admiring the dozens of high-school pennants hanging from the ceiling and the motorcycle fixed high on the back wall.

"There's a table over there," Victor said, pointing to the far side of the room.

"Great," said Nancy. "I'll just wash my hands and be right back."

As Nancy passed Sally's booth, one of the girls sitting with her—she had short, wavy blond hair and pale blue eyes—looked up. Nancy was surprised when she saw the expression of hatred on the girl's face. She tried to think if she had crossed paths with the girl somewhere, but nothing came to her.

Nancy was drying her hands when the bathroom door flew open. Startled, Nancy glanced over her shoulder. The girl from Sally's booth was standing with her back against the door and her hands in the pockets of her leather motorcycle jacket. Her expression was even more hostile than before. There was no mistaking it now—Nancy was definitely the target of her anger.

The girl was short and delicate, but the fury on her face made Nancy cautious. She knew that rage often made people stronger than they seemed.

"I know who you are and what you're up to," the girl snarled.

Who was this girl? What *did* she know? Right now the most important thing was to get away from her. "If you'll please move, I'd like to leave," said Nancy, advancing toward the door.

With shocking strength, the girl pushed Nancy back. "You're not going anywhere," she said in a voice full of menace. "Not until I'm through with you."

Chapter Five

NANCY STAGGERED BACK, almost losing her footing. This girl was out of control. Nancy would have to deal with her carefully.

"I'm telling you, you're mistaken," Nancy said. "I don't know you."

"Maybe not," the girl countered. "But I'm going to make sure you remember me for a long time."

The girl pulled her right hand back, as if to rake her nails across Nancy's face. As her arm started to move, Nancy reached up and caught her wrist. Her thumb pressed on a spot where the nerves that control the hand run close to the surface. The girl turned pale, and her hand opened.

"Let me go," she muttered through clenched teeth.

"Kim!" a high-pitched voice called. "What's going on in there?"

Nancy took a quick step to the left and put her back to the wall, ready to take on two attackers if she had to. But the newcomer was Sally, her hazel eyes filled with concern.

"Nothing," Nancy's opponent said, almost spitting out the word. A moment later she stormed out of the rest room.

"Who was that, and what is her problem?" Nancy asked Sally.

"Her name's Kim Forster," Sally replied. "When she saw you walk in with Victor, it kind of lit her fuse, if you know what I mean."

“You mean, she and Victor—” Nancy leaned back against the wall. “I thought maybe she found out I was investigating this case and she was involved somehow.”

“I doubt it,” said Sally. “She’s got this intense thing for Victor. They dated for a while. Kim didn’t seem that upset when it ended, but for the past couple of weeks all she can talk about is what a rat he is.”

“That’s odd,” Nancy remarked. “I wonder what set her off?” With a shake of her head, she added, “Well, I’ve got other things to worry about. Have you discovered if any other kids have been approached by the grade-changer?”

“No luck so far. How about you?”

“Nothing yet,” Nancy told her. “Listen, I’d better get back to Victor. He’s probably wondering what happened to me.”

“And I’d better get back to Kim,” Sally replied. “Now that she’s cooled off a little, I’d better make sure she stays that way.”

As Nancy walked back to her table she could almost feel Kim’s glare boring into her back. If that was the way Kim was after cooling off, it was a good thing that she hadn’t stayed heated up!

Victor looked up as Nancy sat down. “You were gone so long that I went ahead and ordered for you. A cheeseburger and french fries—okay?”

“Fine. I just ran into a friend of yours.” Nancy made a slight motion of her head in the direction of Sally and Kim’s booth.

Victor glanced across the room, then shifted uneasily. “Oh. Did you have any, uh, problems?”

“Sort of. Kim seems to be pretty hot-tempered and impulsive.”

“You could say that,” he replied with an empty little laugh. “Did she try to show you her deed? The one that says she owns me?”

“No,” Nancy said, chuckling.

“Good. It’s a forgery, anyway.” He paused and studied the top of the table. “We had a few dates, that’s all. No big deal. And we stopped dating, because it wasn’t working for either of us. We were both okay with that—I thought. But now she looks at me like I’m a worm she’s planning to dissect for her biology project.”

Nancy leaned back to let the waiter set their food on the table. She wanted to get off the topic of Kim and back to investigating the case. “How long have you been interested in computers?”

“Since I was fourteen,” he said. “I was in a car accident. I got banged up pretty bad—missed a whole year of school. I should have graduated last year, but I had to make up the year I lost. Anyway, while I was laid up, I started hacking around with my dad’s home PC. I couldn’t do much else that year.” Victor leaned back in his chair and smiled. “And *that* is how I became the computer genius you see before you today.”

“I bet I can guess what you’re going to study in college,” said Nancy, taking a bite of her burger.

His smile disappeared, and he became serious. “The big question isn’t what, it’s where. The places that have really good Information Sciences programs cost a fortune. I don’t have that kind of money. I’m at Brewster on a full scholarship. So either I get a college scholarship or I settle for a second- or third-rate school. That’s where you come in.”

“It is?” Nancy asked cautiously.

“For sure. You’re going to help me raise my grades. I’m counting on it.” He gave her another of his charming grins.

Nancy couldn’t help smiling back, but as she did, she studied Victor’s face. He seemed to be open and uncomplicated, but could she really tell? Did his remark have a double meaning, or was

he simply talking about the tutoring program?

“How about a movie tonight?” Victor asked boldly as he wolfed down the last of the fries.

Time to tell him about Ned, said Nancy to herself. She told Victor all about her relationship with her boyfriend. To her surprise, Victor began searching for something under the table, then the chair. “What are you looking for?” she asked.

“Ned,” he said with a smile.

“Well, he’s sure not here.” Nancy laughed.

“Exactly,” said Victor, gazing meaningfully into her eyes. “I am. So let’s forget about Ned.”

“I can’t,” said Nancy. “Anyway, I’m your tutor—I don’t think I can go out with students.”

“It’s not like you’re a real teacher. Come on, why not?” Victor replied.

Nancy felt herself melt a little in the warmth of his gaze, but all she said was “I have a couple of errands to run. Let’s get the check.”

“I should get home, too,” said Victor. “My computer must be starting to wonder what happened to me.” He signaled the waiter and paid for their burgers, and then they left.

As she drove home, Nancy reviewed the case. Even though she liked him, Victor Paredes definitely had to be a suspect. He had bragged to her that he could do whatever he wanted with the computer system. He hadn’t made a secret of his poor grades in English or about his need for money to go to college. What if he had first cracked the school records access code while trying to change his own transcript, then realized that he had a very profitable product to sell? He was no dope—he might have decided to leave his own grades unchanged for the time being, just in case suspicion fell on him. Hadn’t he been awfully quick to bring up just that point?

Nancy laughed. That was like saying that because a criminal might try to look innocent, anyone who looked innocent must be guilty!

Pushing Victor out of her thoughts for the moment, Nancy started to think about Kim. Had her attack on Nancy really been caused by jealousy? Or was she somehow connected to the case? But Nancy didn’t see how Kim would know that she was a detective, or that there was a grade-changing scheme.

And what about Randi, the newspaper reporter? Was she as straight as she seemed? She obviously knew how to use the computer very well, and she had seemed anxious to clear her computer screen when Nancy showed up. In addition, she was petite and a brunette, just as Mrs. Tillman had described I. Wynn. So far, she was the only one who fit that description.

And, of course, there was Phyllis Hathaway. She was still Nancy’s number-one suspect. Nancy resolved to find out more about her and her mysterious friend Dana the next day.

The next morning Nancy had a break after her third student. It wasn’t long enough to do any investigating, but it did give her time to go to the faculty lounge and fix herself a cup of tea. As she was carrying it back to the learning lab, she ran into Victor. He was standing in the hall talking to a heavyset young woman with curly dark hair and green eyes. She was wearing a navy blue business suit and had a still-damp raincoat draped over her arm. It had poured all morning.

“Hey, Nancy,” Victor called. “Come here, I want you to meet someone.” When Nancy joined them, he continued, “You were asking questions about the school computer system? Here’s someone who knows it inside out. Meet Ms. MacCauley, president of PointTech Computers and queen of the River Heights hackers.”

“Victor!” the woman said in mock outrage. “I’ve told you before, you don’t call people hackers these days. It’s like—oh, I don’t know what, but don’t do it.”

Victor saluted. “Yes, ma’am!” Then he turned back to Nancy. “Ms. MacCauley heads up

PointTech, the company that designed the system here at Brewster. Whenever it goes down, she's the one who catches the flak and puts it back on line."

"Does the system go down often?" asked Nancy.

"No," Ms. MacCauley answered.

"Yes," said Victor at the same moment.

"Let's put it this way," Ms. MacCauley said, smiling. "It's a complex system that's had a lot of different demands put on it. It's designed to handle them, but sometimes the pressure makes it a little ornery. That's when I step in, to give it lots of strokes and a few well-placed strategic kicks."

Nancy returned the woman's smile. "I can easily imagine kicking a computer," said Nancy. "But how do you go about stroking it?" Maybe this was her chance to learn something helpful about the computer system at Brewster. "Do you have a few minutes to show me a little more about the system?"

Ms. MacCauley glanced at her wristwatch, then said, "I guess I do."

"There's a terminal in the learning lab, where I'm working," Nancy added.

Victor gave a snort and said, "Thanks to Ms. MacCauley, there's a terminal in practically every space in this school, except the broom closet!"

The woman turned to him and said with a straight face, "What happened to that one? Did someone steal it?" Then, laughing, they all went up to the learning lab.

A few moments later Nancy found herself seated at the terminal with an expert leaning over each of her shoulders. She turned on the power, typed in her password at the log-on prompt, and hit the Enter button.

A list of menus appeared on the screen. "Is there anything in particular you'd like to know how to do?" Ms. MacCauley asked her.

Nancy hesitated a moment. She had to be careful what she asked. If Victor was the grade-changer, she didn't want him to suspect she was on his trail.

"I was wondering," she said lightly, "if someone sent you a message, would there be any way of finding out what terminal it came from?"

"You could," Ms. MacCauley replied with a nod. "If you refuse the message, the computer will tell you that it's returning the message to its place of origin. It will say: 'Returning refused message to terminal twelve,' or whatever terminal it is."

"And how could you find out where terminal twelve is located?" asked Nancy.

"You couldn't," Ms. MacCauley replied. "You'd have to have access to a set of computer files that the regular student user couldn't get to."

She'd have to ask Walter to look at the file, thought Nancy. "Why can't students have that information?" she asked Ms. MacCauley. "Is it for security reasons?"

"Not really. We simply didn't want to overload the active systems with files students don't need. By storing this information in a separate reference directory, we freed up some space for active use. No one but authorized personnel can get into that file."

"Authorized personnel and me," Victor piped up.

Ms. MacCauley shot him an exasperated look. "Victor," she said, covering her ears, "I'm not hearing this. Don't tell me these things."

Disregarding the playful warning, Victor leaned in closer to Nancy—closer than he had to. "Watch this," he said as his fingers flew across the keyboard. "Ta da!" he crowed finally.

There it was! A complete listing of all the terminals in the school next to their code reference numbers. Nancy's heart skipped a beat. Maybe she could just get a copy of the list now without

bothering the headmaster. But she couldn't ask for it without making Victor suspicious.

"Oh, no!" Nancy exclaimed suddenly, glancing at her watch. "A student's due to arrive any minute, and I'm not prepared yet!"

Nancy jumped up from her seat and pretended to twist her ankle. She pitched forward, bringing her hand down on the keyboard—making sure to hit only one button: Print Screen.

Noisily, the printer sprang into action. "Oh, my gosh!" she cried, feigning surprise.

"Are you okay?" asked Victor.

"It's just my ankle," she moaned. "I hope it doesn't swell up."

"I'm going to get a cold, wet towel," Ms. MacCauley volunteered. "That might keep it from swelling."

"Let's take a look at that," said Victor as Ms. MacCauley left the room. He knelt down in front of her and propped her foot up on his leg. Slipping off her loafer, he gently rotated the ankle. "Does that hurt?" he asked, his amber eyes meeting hers.

They were startled by a strangled cry from the doorway. Nancy looked over and saw Kim standing there, her face crimson with anger.

"You'll be sorry," she cried. "You two will wish you were never born when I'm through with you!"

Chapter Six

KIM TURNED AND FLED down the hall.

"I'd better try to talk to her," Victor said, dashing out of the room.

Nancy hit the Advance button on the printer, and the paper moved up enough so that she could tear off the three sheets of the printout and slip them into her bag.

"What was that about?" a voice spoke up behind her.

Nancy whirled around to find Ms. MacCauley standing in the doorway. For a moment she thought the woman had been talking about the printout. Then Nancy realized she was watching Kim and Victor.

"Just some kind of misunderstanding," said Nancy.

Ms. MacCauley turned her attention back to Nancy. "How's your ankle?" she asked, offering her a few cool, wet paper towels.

"Huh—oh, it'll be okay." Nancy took the towel and pressed it to her ankle. "Do you know what else? I feel so stupid. My student isn't even due to arrive for another half-hour. I was mistaken. I'm not used to my schedule yet."

"Terrific," said Ms. MacCauley, settling herself at the terminal. "We can continue while Victor sorts out his love life." With nimble fingers, she closed out the directory of computer terminals. She chuckled and shook her head as she worked. "That Victor! He'd better watch his step or he'll land in big trouble someday. Once you know how to break into a system it's very tempting to make mischief. Believe me, I know."

There was something in the way she said "I know" that jolted Nancy's memory. Nancy gave Ms. MacCauley a probing look. She was obviously in her early twenties, only a few years older than Nancy. Nancy tried to remember what her father had told her about the girl who had gotten in trouble for using her computer to alter her parents' telephone bills. Ms. MacCauley seemed to be about the right age. She had her own computer company in River Heights, too. And the remark she'd just made indicated that she had gotten into computer-related trouble. Nancy would

be willing to bet that Ms. MacCauley was the girl her father had defended!

Trying to remain calm, Nancy said, "I suppose a person could tamper with all sorts of things, like bank records, government files—even telephone bills."

Ms. MacCauley looked so sharply at Nancy that Nancy knew her hunch was right.

"Well, uh, let me show you how the E-mail works," Ms. MacCauley said, her attention on the computer once again. "See these menus on the screen?" Nancy nodded, and Ms. MacCauley went on, "You see the word MAIL? That allows you to send and receive electronic mail. Do you have a mailbox yet?"

"Phyllis Hathaway gave me a password," Nancy replied. "But I don't know if I have an E-mail box."

"That's easily fixed," said Ms. MacCauley. She tapped in some commands. "There. From now on, whenever you log onto the system, it will tell you if there's any E-mail in your box. I've just sent you today's student mailings. Try it. Log off, then log back on."

Obediently, Nancy exited from the system, then reentered and typed in her password. When she hit Return, a blinking message flashed on the screen: You have three E-mail messages. Do you want to read them now? Y/N.

Nancy pressed Y. A school calendar appeared on the screen, followed by a list of weekly club meetings and an announcement of tryouts for the next Drama Society play.

Ms. MacCauley then showed Nancy how to send a message and how to refuse one.

Nancy kept her eyes on Ms. MacCauley's face as she said, "This system is really impressive. When I met Phyllis yesterday, I got the impression that she had designed it. But didn't Victor just say that you had?"

Ms. MacCauley stiffened. "Ms. Hathaway and I have both worked on it," she said in a tight voice. "She has a solid background in computers and a thorough understanding of the school's needs."

Why was she suddenly so cool? Nancy wondered. Had Nancy hit on something when she mentioned Ms. Hathaway?

"Well, however it happened," Nancy said lightly, "the computer system seems to be a big plus at Brewster. You should be proud of yourselves."

"We are," Ms. MacCauley replied. "Too bad the trustees didn't feel that way when they chose the new head for the school. Phyllis would have been the perfect choice." Abruptly, she got to her feet, saying, "I have to get back to my office."

"I'll walk you outside," Nancy volunteered. She stretched a little as she got to her feet. "I could use some exercise." Besides, there was more she wanted to learn from Ms. MacCauley.

"I have one more question," said Nancy, grabbing her raincoat. "Could I read a message and still find out where it was sent from?"

"This is one of the few systems on which you can," Ms. MacCauley said proudly as they went downstairs to exit. "If you save the message after reading it and *then* refuse it, you'll see the terminal code come up as it's returned to its origin."

The sun was beginning to peek out through the heavy gray cloud cover. But the parking lot was still awash, and Nancy and Ms. MacCauley had to sidestep large puddles in the parking lot.

Ms. MacCauley stopped next to a blue compact car that was several years old. "Nice to meet you, Nancy," she said, offering her hand. "Good luck with the tutoring."

"Thanks," Nancy replied.

Ms. MacCauley got behind the wheel and drove off, giving Nancy a quick wave. Nancy waved back, then turned to go inside. The headmaster was standing a dozen feet away, watching

her, his hands jammed into the pockets of his raincoat.

“Hi, Mr. Friedbinder,” Nancy said as she walked up to him. “Walter, I mean.”

“Hello, Nancy,” he replied. “I just went to check on my car windows. Kind of late now that the rain has stopped, I guess. Oh, by the way, how’s your work going?”

Nancy glanced around to be sure they couldn’t be overheard, then said, “I’m beginning to get a few leads. But I should warn you—I’m pretty sure this is going to turn out to be bigger than just one incident.”

“That’s bad,” said Walter, shaking his head slowly. “I hope we can control the damage. By the way, I’d be careful about getting too friendly with Dana MacCauley.”

Nancy blinked. *Dana MacCauley*? She must be the Dana that Phyllis Hathaway had been talking to on the telephone the day before!

“Why do you say that?” Nancy asked.

He hesitated before answering, “In my opinion, MacCauley took Brewster Academy to the cleaners. She talked the school into buying a system that’s much more complicated and expensive than was needed. I wasn’t here when it was bought and installed. If I had been, I would have made a real stink. I could have designed a better one in my sleep!”

“Are you suggesting that she’s a crook?” Nancy asked.

“I didn’t say that,” Walter said quickly. “There’s nothing illegal about selling someone something he doesn’t need. But it’s not very principled, either. I may as well tell you that I’m interviewing other people who can keep the computer system going. As soon as I’ve found someone, Dana MacCauley is going to be out in the cold.”

Nancy frowned. “Do you think she has any idea of the way you feel?”

“I’m sure she does,” he said. “I haven’t made any secret of my dissatisfaction.”

As she and the headmaster moved along the walk to the door, Nancy’s thoughts raced. Dana must know more about the computer system than anyone. If she knew that her company was about to run into serious financial trouble, she might be frantic to accumulate extra cash.

Could she and Phyllis have dreamt up the grade-changing racket together? That would explain Dana’s touchiness concerning Phyllis’s involvement in setting up the computer system. Maybe their motive wasn’t just the money. Maybe they hoped to involve Walter Friedbinder in a scandal, a scandal that would cost him his job. Both women had made it clear that they thought Phyllis should have been chosen as the new head. Did they also think she might be chosen as Walter’s replacement, if he were out of the way?

“I’ll leave you now, Nancy,” said Walter, breaking into her thoughts. “Good luck with your work.”

The headmaster continued down the hall toward his office, and Nancy went up to the second floor. Victor was waiting outside the learning lab, leaning against the wall with his hands in his pockets.

“Hi, Teach,” he said, straightening up. He flashed his handsome smile.

Nancy rolled her eyes. “Were you able to calm Kim down?” she asked. “I’m beginning to think it’s not safe to be seen with you.”

“Forgive me, O exalted one!” he wailed. “I have offended you!”

Nancy couldn’t help but laugh. “I do hope you explained what really happened.”

“Oh, I explained,” he told Nancy. “I don’t think she heard a word I said, though. She just kept saying she was going to get even with us for everything.”

Nancy was puzzled. Kim had seen her and Victor together only twice, for a total of about twenty minutes. Why was she so upset? “Everything? Like what?” Nancy asked.

“Beats me,” Victor said with a shrug. “All I can say is, Kim is getting to be a very big drag. I wouldn’t be surprised if she—”

The bell down the hall started to ring and drowned out the rest of his sentence. When it stopped, he said, “I’d better run. I am enrolled in school here, and I don’t want to get kicked out. I’ll look for you after school. Maybe we can go back to the Roost for a hot fudge sundae.”

He walked away quickly, leaving Nancy staring thoughtfully after him. Was Victor getting a little too fond of her? Keeping an eye on him because he was one of her chief suspects was one thing, but playing with his emotions was something else. She *had* told him about Ned, but he didn’t seem to care.

She would just have to watch her step with Victor. For a start, she was *not* going to be around after school for him to find. And the next time they met, she was going to be sure to find a way to work Ned’s name into the conversation.

Nancy unlocked the learning lab, turned on the lights, and checked her watch. She still had three or four minutes before her next student. The computer terminal caught her eye, and she walked over to it, switched it on, and typed in her password. She had a message in her mailbox.

She called it to the screen, expecting an announcement of an upcoming Glee Club concert or a raffle to raise money for the volleyball team.

Instead, these words appeared: Snoops and spies get hurt, Nancy Drew. Go home before you get erased—for good.

Chapter Seven

HER HEART POUNDING, Nancy stared at the monitor screen. She wasn’t imagining the message. It was still there. She leaned closer to study the transmission information at the top of the E-mail message. She knew that password—IW443!

And the time of transmission was— Startled, Nancy rechecked her watch. The message had been entered only minutes before. Recalling what Dana MacCauley had shown her, she saved the message, then refused it. Returning message to terminal 29, came the message on the screen.

In a flash Nancy took her printout from her bag. “Twenty-nine, twenty-nine,” she muttered, running her finger down the list. “There it is!” The message had been sent from the terminal in the newspaper office. If she hurried, she might catch its sender.

At the door, she bumped into the girl who was arriving for her tutoring session. “Sorry,” Nancy gasped. “Have a seat, I’ll be right back!”

As she dashed down the corridor, everyone turned to stare at her. When she reached the *Academician* office, she found it locked and the frosted glass in the upper half of the door dark. Nancy shook the knob a few times.

“Are you looking for someone?” a voice asked.

Startled, Nancy whirled around to find Randi, the girl she had met the day before.

“Oh, yes,” Nancy replied, thinking fast. “A student I’m supposed to tutor asked me to meet her in this room, and she hasn’t shown up. Has anyone been here that you know of?”

“She wanted to meet you at the *Academician* office?” Randi repeated in a dubious tone. She unlocked the office door, flipped on the lights, and motioned Nancy in.

Nancy quickly took in the whole office. Crowded as it was with furniture, there wouldn’t be anyplace for anyone to hide, she saw at once.

“I was in the office myself until ten minutes ago, and there wasn’t anyone else here,” Randi

told her. “Are you sure you’re not mistaken?”

Before Nancy could answer, Randi continued, “I know I’ve seen you before. You look so familiar. I know! I’ve seen your picture in the newspaper! Who are you? What are you doing here?”

Nancy felt her heart sink. She couldn’t let her cover be broken—not now! “As I told you yesterday, I just started working in the tutoring program,” she replied in a rush. “You might have seen my picture because I just won the River Heights art contest. Second prize.”

“Maybe that was it,” said Randi suspiciously. Then she shrugged. “Hey, why don’t I interview you about the program now?”

As the girl reached for a pad and pencil, Nancy hastily said, “I’m not the one you want. I just started, I’m only temporary, and I don’t know that much about it. Why don’t you interview Ms. Hathaway or Mr. Friedbinder?”

Randi wrinkled her nose. “They’re not actually working in the tutoring program; you are. I want to get a ground-level view of it.”

“Then the people you ought to talk to—” Suddenly Nancy clapped her hand over her mouth. “Uh-oh, I just remembered, I left someone in the learning lab waiting for a tutoring session!”

Randi was staring at her as if she *had* lost her mind. Too late Nancy remembered that she’d just told Randi she was meeting a student there at the newspaper office. Luckily, all Randi said was, “Okay, but I still want that interview with you, Nancy Drew.”

Shooting Randi an apologetic smile, Nancy hurried back down the hall.

Suddenly she gasped and stopped short so quickly a guy with a big stack of books under one arm, obviously late to class, walked straight into her. She helped him pick up his books, thinking about what Randi had said.

Randi had called her Nancy Drew—not Nancy Stevens. Somehow she’d uncovered Nancy’s real identity. Randi wasn’t the only one who had addressed her by her full name in the last hour, either. The author of that threatening message had done the same. Walter Friedbinder and Sally Lane were supposed to be the only ones who knew her real name, but if Randi knew, others might, too.

Nancy groaned. It was going to be even more difficult to track down the grade-changer now.

When she reached the learning lab, it was empty. The girl must have gotten impatient and left. Nancy turned on the computer and checked her E-mail. No new messages had come in for her.

“Hey, there,” a familiar voice called from the doorway. “Sharpening your computer skills?”

Nancy turned to see Victor stroll into the room. “Something like that,” Nancy answered him. “Listen, will you excuse me? I have to make a phone call.”

Victor’s face fell, but all he said was, “Sure. I just sneaked out of class to say hi. Catch you later.”

Once he was gone, Nancy dialed the number of the People’s Federal Bank. Harrison Lane came on the line at once.

“Nancy!” he said. “I was just going to call you. Eight hundred dollars that was deposited yesterday in I. Wynn’s account was withdrawn from the Archer Avenue bank machine at eight-thirty this morning.”

“Before school hours,” Nancy noted. “Mr. Lane, is there any way you can program the bank’s computer to alert you the next time somebody tries to make a withdrawal or deposit from that account?”

“That shouldn’t be too hard,” the banker said. “We’ll just put a flag on the account number, with instructions to telephone me when it pops up. We can also tell the computer to take extra

time to process any transaction for that account. That way, we'll have enough time to react to the alarm."

"Great," said Nancy. "Can you set it up right away? I don't want our crook to decide to pull out of this scheme before we have a chance to catch whoever it is."

"Neither do I," Lane agreed. "I'll flag that account the moment we get off the phone."

"Thanks." As she hung up, Nancy's stomach growled, reminding her that it was almost time for lunch.

Nancy's heart sank when she entered the anteroom separating Phyllis Hathaway's and Walter's offices. She'd rushed there after grabbing a quick bowl of soup in the cafeteria, hoping to find Phyllis out to lunch, but apparently the assistant head was eating in that day and was hunched over some papers on her desk. As Nancy watched, Phyllis took a bite from a sandwich, then turned her attention back to her work.

Stepping out of Phyllis's sight, Nancy leaned against Ms. Arletti's empty desk to think. She had to get the woman out of there so she could search her office.

As she thought, Nancy became aware of Walter Friedbinder's voice from inside his office. "Sure, Mel. We'll talk about it at the staff meeting before the board arrives. . . . Fine. See you then."

Nancy stood up straight as an idea came to her. A second later she sneaked inside Walter's office and closed the door behind her.

"What—?" he began when he saw her, but she silenced him by putting a finger to her lips. His gaze was openly dubious, but he waited while Nancy explained in a whisper what she wanted to do.

"So I call Phyllis in here for an emergency meeting, giving you a chance to search her office?" Walter's intense blue eyes took on a pleased glint. "I'm sure I can handle that."

"Great," said Nancy, smiling at him. "I'll wait out in the hallway until I hear her go into your office. If you can keep her here for ten minutes, that ought to be long enough."

A few minutes later Nancy slipped into the assistant head's office and stood with her back to the closed door. In a flash she scanned the room—two filing cabinets, desk, the computer station, a bookcase, and a coatrack with a raincoat on it. She decided to start with Phyllis's desk, which was against the wall to the left of the door.

Sitting in the desk chair, Nancy glanced through the papers on the desktop, next to the half-eaten tunafish sandwich. They were nothing but notes on an upcoming parents' visiting day. Next she pulled open the top desk drawer and sifted through a jumble of paper clips, rubber bands, and pens.

Nancy saw nothing that would link Phyllis to I. Wynn or the scam. Nor did she find any clues as to what "plan" Phyllis had meant during her phone conversation with Dana that Nancy had overheard.

A few times Nancy paused to listen but heard only the distant hum of Phyllis and Walter talking in the other office.

Next she tried the file. It was locked, but she easily jimmied it open using the lock-picking kit she always kept in her purse. What is this? she thought, her gaze lighting on a binder that was tucked in among the files. The spine was labeled "Computer Password Logbook."

Great! Snatching up the binder, she opened it to the first page. It was a chronological listing of the computer passwords. Next to each password was the name of the student to whom it was assigned and the date the password was issued. All of the entries on the page were made in a

neat, flowing script, probably Phyllis's.

Nancy's head snapped up as she heard a door open and then Phyllis's voice, loud and clear. "Nonsense, Walter, I have the file in my office. It'll just take a second to grab it."

Nancy's breath caught in her throat, and she slammed the book shut. She could hear Walter objecting, but Phyllis wasn't paying any attention. Her heels clicked on the floor as she crossed the wooden anteroom.

Nancy checked frantically for somewhere to hide, but there was nothing—no closet, no enclosed space. Unless she could suddenly disappear, Phyllis was going to catch her red-handed!

Chapter Eight

NANCY DIDN'T HAVE TIME to think about what to do. Holding the binder to her chest, she slid the file drawer shut, then rushed over to squat in the corner behind the door, on the far side of the desk. A split second later Phyllis's clicking heels stopped outside the door and the knob was turned.

Nancy held her breath as the door swung in toward her. She stayed low so Phyllis wouldn't see her silhouette through the frosted glass in the top half of the door. Please leave the door open, Nancy begged silently, and stay on the other side of the room!

She heard a drawer being opened and some papers being rustled over by the desk. Would Phyllis notice the unlocked file drawer or the missing binder?

Every muscle in Nancy's body tensed as Phyllis's shoes clacked back toward Nancy. The assistant head paused at the door a moment, then the door was closed and she was gone.

Nancy's knees went weak, and she let out a long breath. Phew! I'd better work fast and get out of here in case she comes back again! she thought. Reopening the binder, Nancy flipped excitedly to the last page of entries.

There at the end was her own password, NS444. Just above it was the listing for IW443. The name listed was— Nancy squinted, trying to make out the letters. The initials *I* and *W* were clear, but the rest of the name was scrawled illegibly.

Hmm. She compared the handwriting of the IW443 entry to the others. It seemed to be not as distinct but similar otherwise. Had Phyllis tried to disguise her writing so that no one could link her to the fake entry? Or was someone else trying, not quite successfully, to imitate her handwriting so that Phyllis *would* be implicated in the scam?

Nancy shook her head. She needed concrete evidence. Flipping back to the first page, Nancy ran her finger down the listings until she found Phyllis's and Victor's passwords and copied them down. As an afterthought, she wrote down Randi's password, too. Then she replaced the binder in the drawer and began looking through the other files.

It seemed to be dull stuff for the most part—budget information, personnel files, minutes from staff meetings, curriculum files. There was a fat computer file and a manual for the school's system, but Nancy didn't see how reading that would help solve her case.

She glanced at her watch. She'd been there for almost ten minutes now! Phyllis had to be returning any second. Shutting the drawer, Nancy moved quickly over to the filing cabinets, opening them one by one. There was no time to examine them thoroughly, but she didn't see anything unusual or incriminating at first glance.

With a sigh, Nancy closed the last drawer of the file cabinets and scrutinized the office to make sure everything was the same as when she'd entered. Then, after cracking open the door to

check the common waiting room to make sure it was empty, Nancy slipped back through the empty anteroom and into the hall.

Well, she hadn't hit the jackpot, as she'd hoped, but at least she had those passwords now. Maybe they would lead to some valuable discoveries.

Nancy sat at her bedroom desk and pounded on the papers in front of her. "I need a break here!" she muttered into the air.

It was Sunday evening. She'd spent all of Saturday afternoon at Sally Lane's, using her computer. After Sally had shown her how to access the Brewster computer with her PC, Nancy had gone to work. Using the passwords she'd copied from Phyllis's log, she accessed first Phyllis's, then Victor's, then Randi's files.

She'd called up each and every file, checking for anything that would point to any of them as her suspect. By the time she was done, she'd read enough administrative memos, computer programs, and newspaper stories to last a lifetime! But she hadn't found a single thing to incriminate any of the three.

That day she'd given herself a break and had gone shopping at the River Heights Mall with her best friends, George Fayne and Bess Marvin. But her mind was not on shopping. She kept trying to make sense of the evidence she had so far: the threatening message that had been sent from the newspaper room; Randi's knowledge of her real name; Phyllis's hush-hush phone call with Dana; Victor's abilities to doctor off-limits files; the use of her real name on the threatening message. . . .

Depending on how she read the clues, any one of her suspects could be guilty. Nancy had laid out all her notes and papers on her desk, waiting for something to strike her, some pattern she'd overlooked.

A sheet of paper drifted to the floor and caught her eye. Bending to retrieve it, Nancy saw that it was the funny version of Walter Friedbinder's biography that Victor had concocted. She picked up the original biography and compared the two. It was amazing how easily he had turned a serious press release into a joke.

As her eyes flicked from one version to the other, it occurred to her that Friedbinder's real biography was pretty amazing in itself. He had received both a master's degree and a doctorate in his first five years after college and taught at the same time.

"Wow!" Nancy said softly. "That's pretty impressive."

After getting his doctorate, Friedbinder had become dean of students at a small private school. While there he had increased both the percentage of graduates going on to four-year colleges and the number of acceptances at highly prestigious colleges.

No wonder Lane and the other trustees decided to offer Friedbinder the job of headmaster at Brewster. Many people thought the best indication of a school's success was the list of colleges its graduates attended. A private school that wasn't seen as successful would stop attracting students and eventually go broke. So Friedbinder's obvious skill in that area must have been an important plus, at least in the eyes of the board.

Nancy noticed the title of Friedbinder's Ph.D. dissertation: "The Development of Creative Problem-Solving Skills." The press release said he'd gotten it published. The dissertation sounded as if it might help Nancy in her work, so she decided to ask him about borrowing a copy.

Nancy saw Friedbinder at eight-thirty on Monday morning in the school hallway. His manner

was brusque and businesslike. “I need to speak to you privately, Ms. Stevens. Right away,” he said.

As she followed him into his office, Nancy wondered why she had become Ms. Stevens, instead of Nancy. She soon found out.

“When I came in this morning,” said the headmaster, rustling through the papers on his desk, “I found this note in my mailbox.” He held it up.

“What does it say?” asked Nancy.

“I’ll read it to you, word for word,” Friedbinder replied. He took a pair of glasses from his coat pocket, adjusted them on his nose, and read:

“Good grades are big business at Brewster. And the people raking in the dough let a computer do their dirty work. Want your grade changed? Talk to Victor Paredes and Nancy Stevens.”

Chapter Nine

THE FIRST THING Nancy noted was the use of her alias: Nancy Stevens. Whoever wrote the note probably wasn’t the same person who had sent her the threatening message on Friday.

The next thing that struck her was that the note concerned grade changing. Its author knew about the scam.

“That’s very interesting,” Nancy said, taking a seat. “Do you mind if I have a look at it?”

Walter Friedbinder passed it to her. The accusing message was printed in blue felt-tip ink on ordinary lined loose-leaf paper. The large block letters indicated to Nancy that the writer had apparently tried to disguise his or her handwriting. Nancy noticed one peculiarity, though. The small letter *k* had a closed loop for the upper arm, so that it looked like a small capital *R* with a line sticking up from it. Nancy was sure she would recognize it if she came across it again.

“Well?” Friedbinder said. “I thought you were going to solve this case! Now you’re being accused of the crime. What’s going on?”

Nancy looked up. “Hmm? Oh—I have a pretty good idea who wrote this and why. The interesting part is that Victor and I are accused of grade changing, and not of, say, writing graffiti in the halls or selling test answers.”

“What do you mean?” asked the headmaster.

“This person knows about the grade-changing scam,” she explained. “Maybe he or she has been approached by the culprit.”

“What about Victor Paredes?”

“I’m watching him,” said Nancy. “But I don’t have enough evidence to accuse him. I don’t think the person who wrote this does, either. This is the work of a jealous girlfriend.”

Friedbinder seemed to accept this, and his manner relaxed somewhat.

The nine o’clock bell sounded in the corridor outside. Nancy stood up. “I have a student in a few minutes,” she said. “Will you excuse me?”

“Of course,” Friedbinder replied. “And please forgive me. This whole business has made me tense.”

She was in the doorway when she remembered to ask him for a copy of his published dissertation.

“I’m sorry,” he replied. “I have only one copy of it, and it must be in one of the cartons of

books I haven't unpacked yet. In any case, it's pretty dry stuff."

As she walked upstairs to the learning lab, Nancy had a lot to think about. Why had he been so worried about the letter? The idea of her being involved was ridiculous—he had to know that. He was probably so worried about the effects of a scandal that he wasn't thinking clearly.

As for the note's author, Nancy knew of only one person who would want to make trouble for her and Victor, and that was Kim. But why had Kim—assuming she was the one—accused them of grade changing? She must know that someone at Brewster really was changing people's grades for money.

Kim didn't seem to have the computer know-how to be in on the scheme, but had she received an E-mail message from the grade-changer? Or heard rumors from students who had? And what about the fact that the note accused Victor? Was that pure spite or a shrewd guess? Victor was, after all, one of Nancy's suspects. Did Kim know that he was involved? And if so, how?

Nancy shook her head. Too many questions and no answers. She unlocked the learning lab and checked her watch. There were still a few minutes before her student was to arrive. After dumping her things on a chair, she went to her desk to make a phone call. "Mr. Lane?" she said, when she was put through.

"Nancy! I was just going to call you," the banker said. "A deposit of five hundred dollars was made to the account after four on Friday afternoon. My immediate staff had gone home, so I wasn't told about it until this morning."

Nancy whistled. "So if I. Wynn hasn't already withdrawn his money, he should start withdrawing the cash today. Can you arrange for me to be notified here at school as soon as there's any activity in the account?"

"I imagine I can," Lane replied. "You'll have to move quickly, though. I'll buy you as much time as possible by placing a special hold and recheck command on the account number, as well as the slowdown we've already put in place."

"Thanks," said Nancy. "If I'm lucky he or she will go to the Ivy Avenue branch, which is the one closest to the school."

There was a tap on the door. Nancy finished her call and went to answer it. Victor was standing there, looking glum.

"Hi, partner," he said. "How do you like a life of crime?"

"What are you talking about?" Nancy asked. "And what are you doing here?"

"I switched appointments with Margie Adams," he said. "And if you don't know what I'm talking about, you will as soon as Dr. F. gets hold of you. I just came from a grilling in his office."

"I thought I explained everything to him. That letter really shook him up. I can't believe he called you to his office! You'd better come in," she said to Victor, pulling him into the learning lab.

Victor sprawled in the chair next to the computer terminal as Nancy sat at the desk. He gave her a shrewd look. "So you do know about it," he said. "I thought so."

"You're talking about the anonymous letter, right?" Nancy asked.

"Anonymous!" he said with a loud snort. "Kim did everything but staple her photo to the top and put her thumbprint in the lower corner!"

"I figured it had to be her," Nancy said, nodding.

"Listen, I've known Kim since eighth grade, and I've never met anyone else who makes those funny *k*'s. Isn't that proof?"

“That depends,” Nancy replied. “Not if lots of people know she writes that way.”

Victor stared at her, then laughed. “Hey,” he said, “you’d make a great detective!”

Nancy studied his face. Had that been an innocent remark? Or had Victor somehow penetrated her cover? Did he know her name was really Nancy Drew?

She decided not to respond directly to his comment. “Why should Kim—or anyone else, for that matter—accuse us of changing people’s grades for money?” she asked.

“Well,” he answered in an embarrassed voice, “I guess it’s my fault. One time, when Kim and I were going out together, we were talking about how broke we both were. I said I knew how to make a lot of money by offering to change people’s school transcripts.”

“Victor, you didn’t!” Nancy exclaimed.

His cheeks turned pink. “I was just goofing around,” he protested. “I could have said, ‘Let’s hold up a bank or something,’ instead. I didn’t mean it, but I guess Kim didn’t know that.”

“No, I guess not.” Nancy fell silent. Could she believe Victor? He *was* acting uncomfortable. Was it simply because he knew his comment might be misunderstood? Or was this a sort of double-whammy, in which he gave away something embarrassing but harmless in order to convince her that he was being completely open?

“I just told this to Mr. Friedbinder,” Victor added. “But I couldn’t tell if he believed me. I hope he did. I hear colleges pay a lot of attention to your headmaster’s letter of recommendation, and if he shoots me down, I’m dead.”

Nancy realized the conversation was starting to get a little too personal. She was supposed to be tutoring Victor, after all. “Why don’t we see about bringing up your marks in English,” she said brusquely, reaching for her stack of books, “and let Mr. Friedbinder worry about what he says in his letter? Okay, Stu?”

Victor grinned. “Sure thing, Teach!”

After twenty minutes of solid work, Nancy said, “Nice going. Keep this up and I don’t think you’ll have any more problems.”

Victor stretched his arms and yawned. “Thanks,” he replied. “But I can’t help thinking that a lot of what you’re doing could be done by a computer. Not the really creative part, of course, but all those drills.”

“You should talk to Mr. Friedbinder about that,” Nancy told him. “He wrote a doctoral dissertation on creative problem solving. It was even published. I wanted to read it, but his only copy is packed away.”

“Really?” asked Victor. “I bet I could find you another copy somewhere. Let’s see.”

He leaned over and switched on the terminal, then entered a series of commands, separated by pauses. “I’m logging onto an interactive database,” he explained. “One of the things it has is a directory of published dissertations in different university libraries. Do you remember the title and the name of the school?”

Nancy told him, and he typed in the information. After a short while he entered some more commands, then still others. Finally he sat back. “Nope,” he said. “No good. There is one dissertation that sounds kind of similar, but it’s by someone else at a different school. I guess you’ll have to wait until Friedbinder unpacks his copy of it.”

Suddenly the phone rang. Harrison Lane was on the other end. “Right now, at the Ivy Avenue branch. You’d better—”

“Thanks, so long,” said Nancy, not waiting for him to finish.

Grabbing her coat, she ran for the door.

“What’s the matter, Nancy?” Victor called after her.

“Uh—nothing, Victor. Tell anyone after you that I had an emergency. Had to go.” Without another word, Nancy tore down the hallway and out to her car in the parking lot.

Nancy reached the bank in a record-breaking five minutes. She parked right in front and jumped out of the car. Her heart thumped hard in her chest. There, coming out of the bank, was a petite teenage girl with long, almost black hair. She fit the description of I. Wynn exactly.

The girl raised her head, and her face went white when she made eye contact with Nancy. That gave Nancy a good look at her face.

It was Kim! She was wearing a wig, but Nancy recognized her anyway.

“Stop!” Nancy cried as Kim bolted for a red car parked down the street.

Chapter Ten

SPRINTING TO HER CAR, Kim jumped in and turned the key to rev the engine. With a squeal of rubber, the red car roared away from the curb and tore down the street.

Nancy didn’t hesitate. She jumped into her Mustang and broke her own personal record for getting under way. Soon she spotted the car several blocks ahead. It was turning left onto a side street. Nancy followed as fast as the law allowed.

At the side street, she made a racing turn and sped down the winding, tree-lined avenue, the red car still far ahead of her.

Nancy pressed down on the accelerator. Her blue Mustang responded instantly, and the gap began to narrow. They were heading into Sally Lane’s posh neighborhood. The street went down a little hill and curved to the left before straightening out. As Nancy came out of the curve, she muttered, “Oh, rats!”

The street was empty as far as she could see. Somehow Kim had given her the slip.

Nancy braked to a screeching halt. The car couldn’t have gotten that far ahead in the few seconds it was out of sight. It must have turned into one of the driveways.

She began to move again, at little more than walking pace, pausing to peer up each driveway. At the fifth one she got lucky. She could just see the back fender of a red car, sticking out from behind a trellis of vines. She pulled over and parked just beyond the driveway.

The redbrick house was very large, with white shutters, and was set well back from the street. Matching oak trees flanked the brick walk that led to the front door. Nancy walked up to the door. The name engraved on the brass door knocker was Archibald. Hadn’t Sally told her Kim’s last name was Foster, or—Forster, yes, that was it.

Nancy pressed the mother-of-pearl bell to the right of the door. After a few moments a middle-aged woman with gray hair, wearing a navy blue dress and two strings of pearls, opened the door.

“If it’s the Junior League raffle,” she began, “I’m afraid I’ve already—”

Nancy smiled politely and said, “No, ma’am. I’m looking for Kim.”

The woman raised her eyebrows. “Kim? Oh, yes, of course. You must be one of her school friends. It’s around the back, dear. Over the garage.”

Nancy thanked her and went in the direction the woman had indicated. At the back of the house, separated from it by a high hedge, was a two-story brick garage with spaces for four cars. A wooden staircase led up to a second-story door on one side. Nancy climbed the stairs and

knocked.

No one answered, but Nancy was sure she heard someone stirring inside. She knocked again, louder, then called out, “Kim? I have to talk to you.”

There were more rustling sounds, then the door swung open. Kim stood there obviously defeated, the black wig in her hands. “Come on in,” she said, “before Mrs. Archibald hears you.”

Nancy followed her into a small but comfortable living room. On a table between two windows was a large photo in a silver frame. The picture showed a younger and happier Kim seated between a man in a dark suit and a woman in a black dress. Apparently her parents were the housekeepers for the Archibalds.

Seeing where Nancy’s attention was focused, Kim rushed over and turned the photo facedown on the table. “Why don’t you stay out of my life?” she cried.

“I’m afraid I can’t,” Nancy told her. “Kim, what were you doing at the bank?”

“Just what you said,” Kim shot back hotly. “Why can’t you leave me alone?”

“What I said?” Nancy echoed, very confused.

“I haven’t kept a single penny of it for myself, and you both know it,” Kim continued.

Nancy simply stared at the girl. What was she talking about?

“Kim, listen to me,” Nancy said. “I’m a detective. Whoever you think I am, you’re wrong. My real name is Nancy Drew. The reason I’m at Brewster is that someone on the board of trustees asked me to find out who is responsible for the grade-changing racket. And I’m pretty sure you can help me.”

“Oh, su-u-re,” Kim replied, rolling her eyes. “This is a test, right? To see if I can be trusted? Don’t worry. I’ll live up to my end of the bargain.” With that, she collapsed into a chair and began crying bitterly.

Nancy waited until Kim calmed down and straightened in the chair, wiping the back of her hand across her cheeks. “I guess that’s it, huh?” Kim told her. “Now you’ll lower my grade-point average, just the way you said you would if anything went wrong. I can kiss college goodbye.”

Nancy went over and held Kim by the shoulders. “Listen to me! I am *not* the person responsible for this. I swear! You’ve got to tell me what’s going on, Kim. It’s the only way I can help you.”

Kim stared up into Nancy’s eyes. “Are you for real?” she finally asked.

Nancy nodded.

“I was so sure you had to be involved. I just couldn’t see Victor running this on his own,” Kim continued. “He loves fooling around with the school computer and getting it to do weird tricks, but once he’s figured something out, he gets bored and goes on to something else. He couldn’t be bothered to do the same thing over and over, not even for money. So I figured he had to have a partner. Then you showed up, and I was sure.”

“If Victor *did* have a partner, it would be someone at the school,” Nancy pointed out, perching on the edge of the sofa. “But I’ve only just started there, and this grade-changer has been operating for almost two weeks. Besides, what makes you so sure Victor’s involved?”

Kim stared down at her lap and said so softly that Nancy had to lean in closer to hear, “He told me so. He said that he’d changed someone’s grades. He pretended to feel really bad about it, but now I can see that was just a put-on. If he’d meant it, he wouldn’t have kept doing it, and he wouldn’t have forced me to get involved.”

Nancy’s breath caught in her throat. “Why did you write that note to the headmaster?” she asked after a pause. “It was you, wasn’t it?”

“Sure. I was furious at you and Victor for what you were doing to me,” Kim replied, her pale

blue eyes flashing. “I wanted to get you in as much trouble as I could without getting myself in hot water. It didn’t work, did it?”

“It might have,” Nancy told her, “except that Mr. Friedbinder knows who I am and why I’m at Brewster. How did you get involved in this racket?”

“There was a message in my E-mail,” Kim explained. “Whoever sent it knew I couldn’t afford to pay to have my grades changed, but he said I could improve my transcript if I ran a few errands. He also said that if I didn’t agree, my transcript could end up looking a lot worse than it really is. So I opened the account wearing this dumb wig. And he tells me when to pick up the money.”

“Why didn’t you go straight to the headmaster and tell him about it?” Nancy asked.

Kim shook her head sharply. “I couldn’t bring myself to turn Victor in. I’m really hung up on the guy.”

“Victor’s not the only one who could be responsible,” Nancy told Kim. “If I’m going to catch the culprit, I need to know how the money transfer works. I know you have a bank card for that account, but how do you know when to use it, and what happens to the cash?”

“I get an E-mail message,” Kim replied. “In code. If it says M five, I know I should withdraw five hundred dollars on Monday. T ten means one thousand dollars on Tuesday, and so on. It’s usually after or before school, but today the message said to go at lunchtime. I’m missing math right now.”

“How do you deliver the money?” Nancy asked.

“I put the bills in a brown envelope and leave it in one of the faculty mailboxes before school.”

“What?” Nancy exclaimed, straightening up. “Which one?”

Kim shrugged. “It’s not labeled. It’s on the bottom row, on the side near the door.”

Nancy frowned and stared into space. Then she said, “I’m going to need your help to put the person behind this out of business. How about it?”

Kim nodded hesitantly.

“Great,” Nancy continued. “Now, here’s what I have in mind. I want you to deliver the money you picked up today.”

“You do?” said Kim incredulously.

“Yes, I do,” Nancy replied. “And then I want you to stay home from school for the next two days. Think you can play sick for that long?”

“No problem,” Kim said. “No problem at all.”

At eight forty-five the next morning Nancy was standing near the coffee urn in the faculty lounge, paging through a news magazine. She glanced up just as Kim came in, stuck a brown envelope into a mailbox on the bottom row, and scurried out.

More and more teachers were drifting in, checking their mailboxes, and getting coffee. Each time one of them blocked Nancy’s view of the mailboxes, her anxiety level soared. She longed to move closer, but she didn’t dare. The person behind the racket knew Nancy’s real reason for being at Brewster—the threatening message in her E-mail proved that. If she was seen too near the mailboxes, the culprit would sense a trap and leave the envelope with the money where it was.

Nancy straightened up and felt her pulse beat faster. Dana has just walked into the room and paused near the mailboxes. Was this the pickup?

But then she turned and headed straight for the coffee urn. The envelope was still in place.

“Hi, Nancy,” Dana greeted her. “How are you getting along with the computer system?”

“So far, so good,” Nancy replied. “You’re here early. Is there a problem?”

Dana smiled. “No, no. Not this time. I have an appointment near here in a little while, and I thought I’d stop by to make sure the computer beast is behaving itself.”

Nancy smiled back distractedly. She was very aware that Dana was blocking her view of the mailboxes. She made a half-step to the right, but Dana moved in the same direction and began asking her about tutoring. She wanted to know if Nancy had thought of using the computer system.

If she could have, Nancy would have pushed Dana aside. She *had* to see that mailbox.

Slowly Nancy angled to the left. Again, Dana adjusted her position so that she was blocking Nancy’s view. This is unbelievable! Nancy said to herself. Was Dana moving on purpose? It didn’t seem so because she kept talking excitedly about the applications of the computer in tutoring.

Nancy was about to explain that she wasn’t in charge of the program, when Friedbinder entered and paused to survey the room. When he saw Dana and Nancy together, he scowled and turned his back on them. A moment later Phyllis came in. She, too, noticed Dana and Nancy. She gave Nancy a quick nod, then turned to Victor, who had appeared at the door to speak with her.

Dana, her back to the door, missed all this. As the nine o’clock bell rang, she said, “Oh dear, I’d better run. We’ll talk again about coming up with an interactive approach to tutoring. I really think it’s the way to go.”

Heading for the door, Nancy looked at the mailboxes and drew in a quick breath. The brown envelope was gone!

Chapter Eleven

NANCY CONTINUED in the direction of the door, fighting down an impulse to break into a run. How could she have let someone make off with the envelope, right under her nose!

Pausing outside the door, Nancy peered up and down the hall. To her left she saw a girl in jeans and a T-shirt, with books under her arm. To her right was Phyllis Hathaway, just going into the administration offices. She was too far away to see if she had anything in her hand.

The trap had failed, that was obvious. The question was, why? Was it an accident that Dana had blocked Nancy’s view at the crucial moment, or had she done it on purpose?

If it had been a coincidence, then it was just a piece of bad luck. If not, it meant that Dana and Phyllis were guilty *and* that they knew Nancy was trying to trap them. The only way they could have known that was if Kim had told them.

Nancy shook her head. Stop jumping to conclusions, Drew, she told herself. Walter Friedbinder and Victor had also been near the mailboxes. Either of them could have made off with the envelope, too. She would simply have to come up with a new plan for trapping the guilty party.

“Hi, there,” someone called. Nancy turned and saw Randi coming down the hall toward her.

“I looked for you yesterday,” Randi continued. “I still want to do that interview. Are you free at noon?”

Nancy decided it was time to be direct. “Randi, yesterday you called me Nancy Drew. How did you know my name?” She watched Randi’s face carefully. The threatening message had been sent from one of the terminals in the newspaper office after all. That fact alone put Randi in

a very select group of potential suspects.

Randi rolled her eyes. “Oh, come on! It’s not such a big deal. I was just goofing on you yesterday. Can you blame me, after that art show story you gave me? Of course I know who you are. I’m a journalist, right? I read the River Heights papers every day. I’ve seen your name and picture.”

“Have you told this to anyone else?” asked Nancy.

“No,” replied Randi. “A good journalist doesn’t go around blabbing about her biggest story before she’s even written it. So tell me, what are you *really* doing here?”

“I can’t tell you. But I will when it’s over,” Nancy promised. “As long as you keep quiet about it now.”

“Deal,” Randi agreed.

Nancy groaned inwardly as she walked away. A reporter on the trail of a hot scoop was the last thing she needed. She just hoped Randi kept her word.

For the next couple of hours Nancy was too busy helping bewildered sophomores understand the mysteries of past participles to give any thought to her case. When she ushered her last student out the door, she returned to her desk to do some quiet thinking.

Could she eliminate Randi as a suspect? She was inclined to say yes. Yet one thing still bothered her. Randi had been the only one near the newspaper office when the threatening message was sent.

“Hey, I can practically see the wheels going around!” Victor said, interrupting her thoughts. He was standing in the doorway, grinning at her. “Do you know you have steam coming out of your ears?”

Nancy gave a laugh. “Hi, Victor,” she said, in a tone of resignation.

“Wow, what enthusiasm!” he replied, falling into the chair across from her. “You looked a lot more lively when I saw you down in the faculty lounge. Maybe you need to drink more coffee.”

“Maybe I need to do less tutoring,” retorted Nancy. “By the way, what were you doing in the faculty lounge?”

“Uh-oh, she’s starting to pull rank on me,” he teased. “I had a right to be there. I was picking up something for one of my teachers.”

Nancy sat up straighter. “Oh? What? For whom?”

He opened his eyes wide. “‘For whom,’ ” he repeated. “Golly, if I keep hanging around with you, can I learn to talk like that? Or am I a hopeless case?”

“You’re the one who said it, not me,” Nancy replied, with mock sternness. “But seriously, how about answering my question?”

“About the package? Sure. Mr. Parley, my physics teacher, ordered some reprints of an article, and he asked me to get them from his mailbox and bring them to the lab for him. Why?”

Victor’s story could easily be checked, so easily that Nancy doubted he would have told it if it weren’t true. Still, that didn’t mean that the reprints were the only thing he had picked up in the mailroom.

“You didn’t notice a brown envelope, about this big, did you?” she asked, indicating the size with her hands. “Someone was supposed to leave it for me, but it hasn’t turned up.”

“Nope,” he replied, shaking his head. “But I wasn’t really paying attention. I was too busy plotting my next exploit.”

Nancy raised an eyebrow. “And what’s that?”

“Just imagine,” he said, leaning closer. “Tomorrow morning, at the beginning of first period, a cartoon of the headmaster’s face appears on the screen of every terminal in the school.”

“Victor—” Nancy began.

He held up his hand. “Wait, I’m not done. The eyes look one way, then the other. Then, just when everybody is getting spooked, he puts his thumbs in his ears, wiggles his fingers, sticks out his tongue, and makes a really rude noise!”

Nancy laughed in spite of herself. “You won’t really do it, will you?” she asked. “You’d get yourself expelled!”

“I know,” he said with a sigh. “I have to face it—I’m chicken.”

Nancy sat back and studied him a moment. She couldn’t think of anyone who made her laugh as often as Victor did. She was growing to like him and had to admit that she found him very attractive. But if he was guilty, Nancy couldn’t afford to be blinded by his charm.

She’d been hoping not to have to wade through stacks of paper records. But now she could see she’d have to do it. Obviously, she couldn’t cross-check everyone’s records. With four hundred students at Brewster, each taking five courses a year and being graded four times in each course, that would make—eight thousand data points to check. But she could start by cross-checking Victor’s and Kim’s grades, those of her tutoring students, and then a few other students at random.

Making an excuse to Victor, Nancy went downstairs to the school office.

“Hi, Ms. Arletti,” she said to the secretary. “Is the headmaster free?”

In response, Walter Friedbinder appeared in his office door and said, “Hello, Nancy. What can I do for you?”

Nancy explained that she wanted to check the school records of some students against their teachers’ grade rosters. “I’d like the files on Victor Paredes, Kim Forster, and a few others.”

“Victor Paredes, huh?” said Friedbinder. “His name keeps coming up, doesn’t it? His record and Kim’s are on the computer. You can use the one here in the corner. But digging out the grade rosters is another matter. They should be in the file room, shouldn’t they, Ms. Arletti?” He gestured to a door behind the secretary’s desk.

“That’s right,” Ms. Arletti replied. “But they’re in a locked file cabinet, along with other confidential papers. It might take me a while to hunt up the key.”

“Why don’t you come back after lunch?” the headmaster suggested. “I’ll make sure we’re ready for you by then.”

“Here’s a key to the outer door, in case I’m out,” Ms. Arletti added. “I’ll put the file cabinet key in an envelope with your name on it and leave it here on my desk.”

“Thanks,” Nancy told her. As she turned to go, she noticed the door to Phyllis Hathaway’s office was slightly ajar. Was she inside, listening?

Nancy went back to the learning lab and worked for twenty minutes, but soon her impatience got the better of her. Surely Ms. Arletti must have found the file cabinet key by now. Nancy didn’t want to wait until after lunch.

Downstairs, the office door was locked. Nancy found the key she had been given and went in. The envelope with her name was right where Ms. Arletti had said it would be. Nancy took it, went into the file room, and turned on the overhead light.

The room was lined with a dozen gray, four-drawer file cabinets and some shelves piled high with papers. Nancy realized that she had no idea which one she wanted. Was she going to have to try the key in each of them, one by one?

Then she gave a little snort of laughter. There was no point in trying the key unless the cabinet was locked! She tried the top drawer of the nearest cabinet. It opened easily. She shut it and tried the next, which also opened. She kept going until, on the fifth try, she found one that didn’t open.

Maybe this was the one.

She tore open the envelope and took out the little key. She was about to fit it in the lock when a noise caught her attention—the sound of footsteps retreating down the hall outside the office. Someone was running away from the office. Then came a *whoof!* A yellow glare suddenly filled the room.

Nancy whirled and gasped in terror. Flames were shooting up from all around the open doorway, charring the paint on the doorframe. In a flash the flames swooped across the floor, setting stacks of papers on fire.

Already the doorway was completely blocked, and the flames were advancing toward Nancy. Her body tensed as she frantically searched the small, windowless room.

She was trapped!

Chapter Twelve

THE TINY ROOM was filling with black, acrid smoke. Nancy's eyes were stinging, and when she tried to take in a breath, the overheated air seared her lungs.

Struggling to remain calm, she buried her nose and mouth in the crook of her elbow and got down on the floor. The air was a little cooler and less smoky down there, but she knew that wouldn't last. If she didn't find a way out, and very quickly, she was going to die.

Somewhere outside, a fire bell was clamoring. Help was probably on its way by now, but she doubted it could arrive in time to save her. Should she try to run *through* the flames? She shivered with horror at the idea. There was no way to do that without being burned, but at least she would have a chance. By staying in the file room, she had no chance at all.

Why wasn't the sprinkler system working? Nancy raised her eyes to the ceiling and spotted the manual turn-on valve. She didn't hesitate or even take a moment to think or plan. Drawing in a deep breath, Nancy held it, and sprang to her feet.

Under the turn-on valve was a tall steel bookcase. Nancy hurled some of the books onto the floor.

Her chest felt as though a loop of barbed wire were tightening around it. She began climbing the bookcase. The hot metal of the shelves seared her hands, but she ignored the pain. It was happening to someone else, in a distant place.

The higher she got, the thicker the suffocating smoke became. Finally, teetering on the top of the case, her foot braced against a lower shelf, Nancy reached up to the sprinkler valve.

Come on! Come on! she thought desperately as the stubborn valve refused to move. A glob of purple darkness floated in front of Nancy's eyes. A deep nausea rose up inside her. Nancy, you can't pass out, she urged herself. Hang in there!

With a last, desperate twist, Nancy gave the valve all she had. Suddenly bursts of water sprayed down from the small sprinkler heads mounted in the ceiling.

In minutes the flames were dying and Nancy could see the doorway clearly. Coughing and feeling sick, she staggered across the smoky office, collapsing into the arms of a helmeted firefighter, who was just arriving.

When Nancy opened her eyes, the first thing she saw was a clear sky dotted with fluffy white clouds. She blinked, then turned her head. She was lying on a stretcher in the school parking lot, just outside the open door of an ambulance. On one side of her was an alert paramedic with an

oxygen tank in his hand. On the other was Victor, more serious than she had ever seen him.

“Am I okay?” she croaked in a husky voice that surprised her. “The fire’s out?”

“I was going to ask you that,” Victor replied. “And don’t worry about the fire. You had it out so fast they’re going to make us go back to class soon.”

Nancy sent questioning messages to various parts of her body. Once she had received the answers she told him, “My hands hurt. And it aches when I breathe. Everything else seems to be all right.”

“We’ll be taking you to the hospital in a few minutes for examination and treatment,” the paramedic said. “Do you feel up to answering a few questions from the fire marshal before we go?”

“Sure.” Nancy started to sit up, then thought better of it when the parking lot started swirling around her. She would have to stay lying down for now.

The fire marshal was a man of about fifty with a deeply lined face and kind brown eyes. He squatted down next to the stretcher and asked her to tell him what had happened. “Then it was you who turned on the sprinklers. That was quick thinking, young lady. That probably saved your life, as well as kept the fire from doing serious damage. We’re not sure yet why the heat sensors in the sprinkler system failed. Brewster may be in for some heavy fines for having faulty safety equipment.”

“It was arson, wasn’t it?” Nancy said in a low voice.

“What makes you say that?” the fire official asked her, frowning.

“The way it started, all at once, and spread across the floor,” Nancy replied. “It seemed to flow, and to me that sounds like some kind of liquid was burning, not just a bunch of old papers.”

“We don’t know what else may have been stored in that room,” the fire marshal said. “We’re looking into that now. Thanks for your help, Ms. Stevens. If I have any more questions, I’ll be in touch with you.”

“Okay, Bill,” he added, straightening up and turning to one of the paramedics. A few moments later Nancy’s stretcher was secured inside the ambulance, and the vehicle sped away.

Her father was already at the hospital when Nancy arrived. So was Harrison Lane. They joined her in her examining room. After she and the paramedic assured them that she was basically in good shape, Lane said, “Sally called and told me what happened. I called your father. Nancy, I feel terrible that I put you in such danger. I never expected anything like this. I want you to drop this investigation.”

“Not yet,” Nancy told him, shaking her head.

“I beg you,” the banker continued. “If there has to be a scandal at Brewster, so be it. We’ll live it down somehow. At least we won’t be putting you in further jeopardy.”

Nancy shook her head again.

“I told you you were wasting your time,” Carson Drew said to Lane. “Once she’s made up her mind, it’s impossible to talk her out of it.”

“I can’t give up now,” Nancy insisted. She paused while a doctor examined the burns on her hands and put a soothing ointment on them. As he began to wrap them loosely with gauze, Nancy continued.

“The reason the file room was torched is that I’m getting close to a solution to the case—too close for somebody. But I don’t think that I was meant to be trapped like that. If I had gone to the file room when I said I was going to, I would have found the fire department on the scene and

the file room already gutted. But I was impatient to check something, so I went early.”

Her father gave her a sharp look. “Then you think the person who set the fire is someone who knew when you were planning to go to the file room. There can’t be too many people like that.”

Nancy thought a moment. Who *did* know she would be there? There was Friedbinder and Ms. Arletti. Phyllis Hathaway might have been in her office and overheard Nancy asking to check the files. It was possible a student had been in the office with her at the time. And, she recalled, she had suggested to Victor that someone might think to check the grade rosters.

“That’s a strong possibility,” she said. “Of course, the fire’s timing could have been a coincidence. The fire could even have been an accident.”

“You can rule out that possibility,” Lane told her, frowning. “I spoke to the fire marshal a few minutes ago, and he told me unofficially that he’s planning to list it as arson. There’s also strong evidence that someone tampered with the sprinkler system so it wouldn’t go off as it should have. Isn’t there anything I can say to persuade you to give up this case, Nancy?”

Nancy managed a grin. “You could tell me you’ve found the grade-changer. Other than that, I can’t think of a thing that would make me quit now.”

Forty-five minutes later Nancy was released from the hospital. She talked her father into driving her back to Brewster. “I *have* to get back there, Dad,” she coaxed. “The grade-changer is getting scared. The arson proves that. Who knows what he or she is up to at this very moment—probably scrambling like crazy to cover up this scam in any way possible. I. Wynn could disappear altogether if I don’t get to him soon.”

“Okay, okay,” Carson gave in. “Let’s hear what you’ve got so far.”

As they drove toward Brewster, Nancy laid the case out for her father. “I haven’t decided that Phyllis and Dana are guilty yet,” she said, after listing all the clues that pointed to the pair. “And I have to admit, I’m wondering more and more about the headmaster now. Walter knew that I was planning to check some of the records, *and* he knew when.

“By the way, Dad,” she added with a grin. “I’ve figured out that Dana was your client.”

“I had a feeling you would,” her father told her, a proud gleam in his eyes.

A few minutes later he pulled into the Brewster parking lot. Nancy thanked him for the ride and the emotional support and promised that she’d call him to drive her home later.

As she walked into the school, the smell of smoke made Nancy’s stomach turn. It was almost three o’clock, but the halls hadn’t filled up yet with crowds of students going home. She went straight to the office, where Ms. Arletti clucked over Nancy’s burns, her narrow escape, and the mess the fire had made of her office.

It *was* a mess. Much of the furniture had been scorched, and the carpet was soaked with chemicals from the fire extinguishers. Nancy swallowed twice and looked into the file room. The walls and ceiling were dark with soot, and a thick layer of charred, water-soaked papers and books covered the floor. But the file cabinet appeared to have suffered little more than scorched paint.

“One of the maintenance staff will be in to clean out all that rubbish,” Ms. Arletti explained. “With any luck, we’ll be back to normal by tomorrow. Thank goodness the computer system wasn’t damaged. If we lose that, we might as well close the school.”

“I hate to bother you,” said Nancy, “but it doesn’t seem as if the grade rosters were burned. Could I look through them?”

Ms. Arletti sighed. “You’re a determined young woman, aren’t you? Go ahead.”

Nancy opened one of the cabinet drawers and found Kim, Victor, and Sally’s files. She

wincing from the pain as she grabbed them, balancing them gingerly in her arms. Then she took another small stack of student files at random. “Thanks,” she told Ms. Arletti as she left the office. “I’ll return this stuff tomorrow.”

Wanting a place to sit down and go over her materials, Nancy went upstairs to the learning lab. Before opening the files, she decided to check her E-mail.

Three messages were waiting for her. All of them amounted to get-well notes, one each from Walter Friedbinder and Phyllis Hathaway, and the third from Victor, who added an invitation to join him for a hot fudge sundae at the Roost.

Nancy smiled to herself and started to compose an answer. Then she noticed a flashing box appear in the upper corner of the screen. Another piece of E-mail was arriving for her. The password of the sender was IW443!

Chapter Thirteen

NANCY INSTRUCTED the system to print the message on the screen.

You got away this time. Next time you won’t be so lucky. Get out of here while you still can. This is your last warning!

Controlling her reaction of shock and rage, Nancy quickly saved the message, then told the computer to refuse it. Returning message to terminal 29 appeared on the screen. The message had come from the newspaper office again. It had been entered on the system only seconds before.

Nancy whirled around and dashed out the door. The person who had sent the threat would have no way of guessing that Nancy would read it instantly, and not minutes or even hours later. The chances were that he or she was still at the terminal.

Nancy stopped running just before she reached the corridor that led to the office of the *Academician* and began to walk softly. She wanted to catch the guilty person in the act. If he or she tried to leave the office before Nancy got there, it didn’t matter. She would still see the culprit at close enough range to identify him or her, and that was almost as good.

Her heart pounding, Nancy tiptoed up to the door. It was standing ajar. This was it—the moment of truth. She cautiously peeked in. Randi! She was seated at the same terminal where Nancy had seen her the week before. Her back was to the door, and she was typing something on the keyboard.

Stepping into the room, Nancy said, “More threats, Randi? You might as well save computer time and make them in person. I’m here now.”

“Nancy!” Randi jumped up from her chair so quickly that it fell over backward as she spun around to face the doorway.

“You startled me,” the student reporter continued. “What are you doing here?”

“Catching you red-handed,” Nancy replied.

Randi gave her a puzzled look. It was almost convincing. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said. “But I don’t think I like your attitude.”

“What were you writing just now?” Nancy demanded. She pushed past Randi and approached the terminal.

“A story for the paper, about the girls’ soccer team,” Randi replied. “Not that it’s any of your

business.”

Nancy looked at the monitor and read: “Paced by star forward Lisa Mongiello, the team rolled over the Deerfield Falcons, 10–2, last Thursday, clinching their first pre-season game.”

“I want to know what’s going on here,” Randi insisted. “Either tell me right now or get out of my office.”

“About two minutes ago someone sent me a threatening message, from this terminal,” Nancy said. “Do you have anything to say about that?”

Randi’s face turned red. “That’s a dirty lie! I don’t know what kind of game you’re playing, but I’ve been right here, working on the paper, for the last half-hour. And no one—*no one*—has been anywhere near this terminal except me!”

Randi seemed completely sincere. But what about the message that had come from this room? Since she was the only one there both times Nancy had received messages, she was clearly implicated in the scheme.

Or was she? Nancy suddenly thought of another possibility. “You say you’ve been using this terminal steadily for the last half-hour?” she asked in a softer tone. “Did anything unusual happen during that time?”

Randi frowned. “Unusual? No. Well—the computer locked up on me for a few seconds at one point, but that’s not so unusual. It happens every day or so. I keep meaning to ask someone about it.”

“What do you mean, ‘locked up’?” Nancy asked eagerly, a tingle of excitement spreading through her.

“It quits working, sort of,” Randi explained, shrugging. “The screen blanks out, the keyboard goes dead, and then a few seconds later, everything is back to normal. Listen, what’s going on? What’s all this about threats? What kind of case are you working on?”

“I can’t tell you now,” Nancy replied, “but I think I’m beginning to see some of the answers. I promise I’ll tell you everything I can, when the time comes. Right now, I’d better get moving. I need to find Victor Paredes.”

“Why don’t you see if he’s logged onto the system?” Randi suggested. She bent to set her chair upright again. “Knowing Victor, he probably is, unless he’s asleep or in the shower.”

Sitting down in front of the terminal, Randi pressed some keys. “I was right,” she said after a moment. “He’s in the computer room. Do you want to use my terminal to talk to him?”

Nancy didn’t want her conversation with Victor to be open to everyone who happened to be using the computer system. “No thanks. I’ll go down there in person.”

“Suit yourself,” Randi told her. “I’ll tell him you’re coming. And remember, I’m expecting to hear what this is all about. Otherwise, I’ll have to start an investigation of my own.”

Just as Randi had said, Victor was at one of the computer room terminals. “You look pretty good for someone who just got back from the hospital,” he commented. “How do you feel?”

“I’ve been too busy to tell,” Nancy said. “Listen, I have an important question for you. Is it possible to send a message from one terminal in the system to another, but make the system say that it came from a different terminal?”

“Hmm.” Victor leaned back in his chair and stared into space as he considered this. “I don’t see why not,” he answered at last. “It shouldn’t be that hard to program the computer to accept a message for retransmission from a different origin. But you’d leave a trail, of course.”

“You mean, a record of where the message really came from?” Nancy demanded, her blue eyes widening. “Do you know how to find a record like that?”

Victor studied her face for a moment, then nodded. “Probably. A message *to whom*, received

when?”

Nancy smiled at his half-joking use of *whom* and then gave him the information he needed. He busied himself at the terminal, humming the refrain from a hard-rock tune under his breath. Finally, just when Nancy was sure she couldn't stand to wait a second longer, he pushed his chair back and said, “Okay, I got it. The message was actually entered a couple of minutes earlier than it said, and the real place of origin was the work station in Ms. Hathaway's office.”

“You're sure?” Nancy exclaimed.

“Not a hundred percent sure,” he admitted. “There might be a second layer of tricks. Call it eighty percent.”

“Good enough!” Nancy started for the door, then paused to look over her shoulder. “Thanks, Victor,” she added. “You've been super.”

“You're welcome. And don't forget that hot fudge sundae.”

Ms. Arletti's office was almost back to normal, except for the lingering smell of burnt and wet wood. She looked up from some work on her desk as Nancy came in. “Ms. Hathaway?” she replied to Nancy's question. “Oh, what a shame, she just walked out this second. She had an urgent phone call a few minutes ago and told me she had to leave. You can probably catch her in the parking lot if you hurry.”

“Thanks,” Nancy called, jogging out the door.

Nancy's car was in the visitors' parking lot because she hadn't been assigned a permanent teacher space yet. She climbed in, wincing as her hands touched the wheel, and drove around the back of the building, where faculty members parked. A red sedan that looked like Phyllis's was just pulling out into the street. Nancy waited a few seconds, then followed.

The car turned right at the next corner, then left a couple of blocks later. Nancy followed, far enough back to stay unnoticed, she hoped. She was beginning to think she knew where Phyllis was going.

A few minutes later her hunch was confirmed. As Phyllis's car approached Archer Street, the right turn signal started to blink. Sure enough, Phyllis's car slowed as she reached the bank branch, about halfway down the street. Nancy slowed, too, then pulled in behind a van parked on the street. Its bulk would help hide her car from anyone in the bank.

Nancy watched as Phyllis parked in the lot and headed for the bank. While she observed her, Nancy's attention was drawn to a dusty blue car that she knew was Dana MacCauley's. Nancy ducked down in her seat until it, too, pulled into the bank lot, then slid over to the passenger seat and removed a small pair of binoculars from the glove compartment. From there she could just see around the bulk of the van.

Dana was pulling into a spot near Phyllis's car. It was obvious that they had a prearranged meeting. Dana's must have been the urgent phone call Ms. Arletti had referred to.

Dana called to Phyllis, who was waiting for her at the entrance. Together they continued toward the bank. Dana put her bank card in the door slot and the two women entered the twenty-four-hour lobby. Nancy longed to get out of her car and move closer. But she didn't dare. The glass walls of the lobby made it too easy for the women to notice her.

Nancy picked up her binoculars and peered into the window. With a happy, almost triumphant look on her face, Phyllis handed Dana something.

It was a wad of cash!

Chapter Fourteen

NANCY HELD HER BREATH and adjusted the focus on the binoculars. That money had come from Phyllis's purse, not the machine. She couldn't tell the denomination of the bills, but even if they were twenties, the amount would be large. Dana studied the wad a moment, then smiled and shook Phyllis's hand. Dana wrote out a deposit slip, put the cash and the slip in an envelope, and deposited the envelope in the automated teller machine.

Nancy watched the women a while longer. They seemed happy when they left the bank, got into their respective cars, and drove off. Nancy's mind was racing. Normally two people didn't meet at a bank just to make a deposit. Obviously they were up to something. Was Phyllis giving Dana her cut of the illegal money?

When both cars were out of sight, Nancy got out of her car and went to a phone booth near the bank.

Luckily she was able to reach Harrison Lane in his office. After Nancy explained what she wanted to know, he took the number of the telephone she was calling from and promised to call her right back. In fact, it was almost ten minutes before the telephone rang.

"I'm sorry to have taken so long," the banker told her, "but I wanted to be absolutely sure of my facts."

"What did you find?" Nancy asked. "Was I right? Was a big deposit just made into the I. Wynn account?" She held her breath and waited for his response.

"I'm afraid not," said Lane.

Nancy's mouth fell open. "There wasn't?"

"No," he replied. "I'm sorry, but the only recent activity in that account was that withdrawal yesterday afternoon. By the way, I gather your little trap was a success."

"Yes and no," said Nancy. "I got answers to some questions, but the big one is still a mystery. If anything, it's more of a mystery now than ever. You're positive that no one put money into that account from the Archer Street cash machine in the last fifteen minutes? Maybe your records are running a few minutes behind?"

"No, I'm afraid not," Lane said once more. "The only activity at that cash machine in the last quarter-hour was a deposit of two thousand dollars into the account of PointTech Computers. Hmm—I think that's the company that installed the system at the school."

"PointTech?" she repeated. Suddenly an idea occurred to her. "Thanks, Mr. Lane. I'll let you know if I get any closer to a solution." Then Nancy said goodbye and hung up.

As she walked back to her car, she tried to make sense of what she had just learned. Of course! she thought. I should have realized right away! The I. Wynn account was just a cover-up account. It was only for drop-off and pick-up purposes. The money was actually going into the PointTech account. It was the perfect cover. Yet there had been no activity in the I. Wynn account at all. Maybe the two thousand dollars represented most of the cash students had paid till then.

Nancy was distracted from her thoughts as she felt her hands throbbing. It was time to put more anesthetic cream on them, so she started up her car and drove home, hoping her dad wasn't mad because she hadn't called him.

"Hannah, that pot roast was delicious," said Nancy, pushing her empty plate away from her. It turned out that Carson Drew had had to work late anyway, so Nancy and Hannah ate a dinner of pot roast, potatoes, and broccoli alone. "I couldn't eat another bite."

The housekeeper raised her eyebrows, a teasing glint in her eyes as she said, "I guess that means you won't be having any of my chocolate-chip cookies."

"Bite your tongue!" Nancy exclaimed. "You know I can always find room for a cookie, Hannah."

She got up and began helping Hannah clear the table, but the housekeeper waved her away. "I'll get it, dear. You need to give those poor hands a rest."

"Thanks, Hannah." She gave Hannah a quick hug after grabbing a couple of cookies, and went up to her room. Stretching out on her bed, Nancy simply let her mind wander. In the past she'd discovered that sometimes confusing clues made sense when she did this. She began to drift off to sleep, images from the case swimming through her mind.

One face continued to reappear—that of Walter Friedbinder. Walter Friedbinder standing next to the faculty mailboxes. Walter Friedbinder making plans to check the filing cabinets. Walter Friedbinder reacting to the note Kim had left him. And, Nancy thought, he knew her real last name.

She'd noted his odd behavior on several occasions, but she'd been so busy concentrating on Dana and Phyllis and Victor that she hadn't actively investigated the headmaster.

Nancy suddenly came fully awake and sat up in her bed. She got up and went to her desk for Friedbinder's biography. Then she began dialing the universities that he said he'd attended. It was late, though, and she wasn't able to get through to any of the offices. She'd have to wait until the morning to check on Friedbinder's background story.

Propping her elbows on her desk, Nancy rested her chin in her palms. She could be wrong about Friedbinder. After all, Kim was the only suspect she'd ruled out so far.

She headed downstairs, her mind still on the case, but the sound of the doorbell interrupted her thoughts. Nancy opened the door to find herself face-to-face with Victor.

"Hi," he said a little nervously. "I hope you don't mind, but I looked up your address in the phone book."

An alarm went off in Nancy's brain. In order to look up her address, Victor had to know her last name—her real last name. "Is that so?" she asked. "How did you know where to look?"

"Kim told me who you really are." Victor's tone was flat. The sparkle in his amber eyes and his easy grin were gone. He was pale and seemed anxious. "I'd like to talk to you," he said. "Want to take a drive? It's kind of important."

"Okay," Nancy agreed, grabbing her denim jacket from the hall closet. She called to Hannah to let her know where she was going. "Come on," she said, pulling the door closed behind them.

They climbed into Victor's beat-up car and began to drive. The night had grown foggy, and the streetlights gave only a hazy, dim glow. Occasionally Victor flipped on his wipers to brush the mist from the windshield. For five full minutes neither of them said a word. Then, pulling to a stop at the curb of a residential street, Victor turned to her.

"So you're the famous Nancy Drew," he said. "I guess I'm the guy you're after, huh?"

Nancy shot Victor a quick look. What was he saying? Was this an admission that he was the grade-changer? "I don't know," she hedged. "Are you?"

"Don't play games with me," Victor said, a rough edge in his voice. "I know changing Phil's grade wasn't right, but I'd do it again."

"Why don't you just tell me how it all started," she said carefully. Nancy didn't want to reveal that she didn't know about Phil or even who he was. I'll just hear Victor out, she decided.

"That's simple," Victor replied. "About a year ago, a guy who's been a close friend of mine since we were kids told me he was in big trouble. He's an ace basketball player, and a couple of

good universities had their eye on him, but he had flubbed one of his courses during fall semester. He was afraid that they were about to put him on academic probation, right before basketball season started. He'd be bumped from the varsity and lose his chance at a scholarship."

"So he asked you to change his grade?" Nancy suggested.

Victor shook his head. "Not a chance! He never even knew. It was all my idea. I did a good job, too. I didn't dare change that D he'd gotten. It would have been too easy to spot. So instead, I eased his other grades up, just enough to bring his average above the danger line."

"I see," Nancy said. "And once you found out how easy it was, you decided to keep doing it, only for money."

Victor stared at her blankly for a moment before asking, "Is that what's going on?" His amber eyes grew wide with surprise. "I figured you were trying to find out who changed my pal's grades. I thought Friedbinder had noticed it and put you on the case. Boy, do I feel dumb! What you're investigating is much bigger, isn't it? Well, I can tell you for sure that it's not me. I don't care if you believe me or not, it's the truth. I fiddled with my friend's record—one time. Afterward I swore I'd never do anything like that again. And I haven't."

Nancy didn't know what to think. Victor's manner was very convincing, but all good liars could be convincing. She measured Victor against what she knew about the true criminal. Victor could be made to fit the profile, but only by making a number of unlikely assumptions.

She didn't see why he'd tell her about his friend Phil if he really was changing grades for money. Then there was the fact that Nancy's threatening messages had come from Phyllis Hathaway's computer. It would probably be pretty hard, if not impossible, for Victor to gain access to her office. And why would he bother when he had easy access to so many other terminals?

Besides, Nancy had better candidates already, ones who fit the pattern of facts almost perfectly.

"I guess I blurted out my little secret when I didn't really need to," Victor noted. "Are you going to tell Friedbinder?"

Nancy was silent for a long moment. Then she said, "Why don't you confess to him yourself, Victor? That would probably help things go more in your favor. I don't think it would be fair to penalize someone too harshly for one mistake. And I suspect the people in charge at Brewster will end up feeling the same way—once they understand the circumstances."

"I hope you're right," Victor said in a gloomy voice. He turned around and started the engine, then added, "It's weird, but I feel better now that you know. Thanks for listening. I'd better get you home."

"One more thing," said Nancy. "Don't confess right away. Wait a day or so."

"Why?" he asked.

"You may be confessing to a whole new set of people," she told him. "That's all I can tell you right now."

Victor whistled softly. "Sounds like big-time stuff."

On the drive back, Nancy settled into her seat and closed her eyes, starting to plan her next move. When she opened them, she saw that they were just passing Brewster Academy.

"I just saw lights in the school office," she said urgently, grabbing Victor's arm. "It's nearly nine. Who'd be there at this time?"

Victor pulled over to the curb. "Cleaning people?" he suggested, following her gaze. "Maybe they brought somebody in to work on the fire damage."

"Maybe," Nancy replied. "But I'd like to check it out. Do you mind?"

His answer was to drive into the school parking lot. They got out of the car and walked quietly up to the front door. To Nancy's surprise, it was open.

"I don't like this," Nancy muttered. "Come on."

Down the hallway, a fan of light spilled out from the open door to the administration offices. Nancy led the way, creeping on tiptoe, and peeked inside. Dana MacCauley and Phyllis Hathaway were standing in the far corner of Phyllis's office, staring down at the screen of the computer terminal. Dana was shaking her head, a puzzled expression on her face.

Suddenly Phyllis let out a cry of alarm. "Dana, do something, quick!" she shouted. "It's starting to reformat the hard disk. If we can't save the file, our entire plan will be ruined!"

Chapter Fifteen

NANCY'S HEART WAS POUNDING. She was tempted to rush in and catch the two women off guard, but there was one thing she had to check first.

Victor tapped Nancy's arm, then whispered, "I could probably help them out."

That gave Nancy an idea. "Yeah, go ahead," she said quietly. "Do what you can, and keep them in there for as long as possible."

Victor nodded, giving her the thumbs-up sign. Nancy stepped back as Victor sauntered into Phyllis's office. "Hey, ladies, what's the problem?" she heard him say in his most upbeat voice. "I saw lights and came to investigate. Don't want anyone burglarizing my school."

"Boy, am I glad you're here!" Dana exclaimed. "Sit down and see what you can do with this."

From the hallway, Nancy watched as Victor sat in front of the computer and began to work. She waited until they were all staring at the computer screen and then stole silently through the anteroom and into Friedbinder's office. She didn't dare turn on the light. Outside the security lights glistened through the foggy mist. It would have to be enough light.

Nancy tugged at the middle drawer of Friedbinder's desk. It was locked. Taking a letter opener off his desk, she used it to work at the lock. Open, she silently urged it.

With a satisfying click the lock finally gave, and Nancy pulled open the drawer.

"Jackpot!" she murmured softly. In the dim light she saw all she needed. Eagerly she sorted through papers. There was a bit of ripped newspaper—the obituary of Ignatz Wynn. The name and address were highlighted in yellow. There was also an opened letter addressed to the deceased Mr. Wynn. Inside was a Social Security check with Wynn's Social Security number written on it. Nancy recalled the old woman telling her that a man had come by the house. It must have been Friedbinder. He'd been snooping around for the Social Security number, and he'd found it.

Nancy continued to sort through the papers. On a yellow legal pad she found names and Friedbinder's notes to himself scrawled casually across the paper. "Sally Lane—\$1,000," read one line. Altogether, Nancy counted six more students' names with numbers scribbled beside them. On the top of the pad he'd written a note to himself. "Kim Forster—eager to go to college. Needs scholarship. Can't afford payment. Any use?"

"You found a use for her, didn't you," said Nancy, completely disgusted. She tore the sheet off the pad of paper and stuck it in her jacket pocket. Then she continued to search through the drawer. The next thing she found was a small notepad. Opening it, Nancy saw computer notes. Most of them were unintelligible to Nancy, but she recognized the dots, squiggles, asterisks, and letters as being computer commands. They were definitely in Friedbinder's handwriting. Here

was good proof that Friedbinder had a very sophisticated knowledge of computers!

Suddenly the sound of raised voices made Nancy jerk up her head. “Mr. Friedbinder!” Victor nearly shouted, warning Nancy. “What are you doing here?”

“I might ask you the same,” Nancy heard Friedbinder reply, his voice full of accusation. “As if I didn’t know.”

Shoving the notepad into her jacket pocket, Nancy moved quickly to the door but not quickly enough. She was momentarily blinded as Friedbinder entered his office and snapped on the light. He stopped short when he saw her. “And what are you doing here?” he growled.

“My job,” she said coolly.

Friedbinder seemed to relax. “And you’ve done a good job, too,” he said. “I see you’ve witnessed all three of them. I should have guessed they were all in it together.”

He was trying to pin the whole scam on Phyllis, Dana, and Victor, but Nancy already had the proof she needed. “Why are *you* here?” she asked, trying to keep her voice neutral.

“Forgot some papers,” he said. “It was just a lucky coincidence I got here in time to see them trying to finish the job they started by setting today’s fire.”

“What job is that?” asked Nancy.

“Isn’t it obvious? Trying to destroy evidence of their little grade-changing racket. I guess they realized you were getting close.”

Friedbinder walked to his desk, picked up the phone, and dialed a number. “Harrison? Walter here. Listen, Nancy Drew and I have our grade-changer,” he said into the receiver. “Can you get down here? Good.”

At that moment Phyllis Hathaway appeared in the doorway, her face livid with anger. Apparently she’d overheard part of the conversation. “What are you up to now, you—you worm?” she cried.

“Nice try, Phyllis, but it won’t work,” said Friedbinder, glowering at the assistant headmaster. “I think you can kiss your career as an educator goodbye.”

“Is that so?” Phyllis replied. “Well, for your information that’s exactly what I intend to do. I’ve just given Dana the last payment making me half owner of PointTech Computers. I’m giving you my notice.”

That certainly explains a lot, thought Nancy—the money changing hands, the phone calls, the meetings.

“Why would the records being destroyed spoil your plan?” Nancy asked, recalling what she’d heard Phyllis say when they came in.

“Because I couldn’t resign with Brewster in the middle of a total computer breakdown. That would be pretty irresponsible. It would look as if I’d done it to make work for PointTech—which is not true,” Phyllis said emphatically. “A major computer problem would delay my leaving by months.”

“That’s almost convincing,” Friedbinder sneered. “You and your partners don’t fool me. First Dana saddled Brewster with an overelaborate and faulty computer system. That was bad enough. But now this grade-changing plan . . . Is your greed limitless?”

Nancy observed Friedbinder carefully. He was as tense as a tiger ready to spring. His icy blue eyes were fixed menacingly on Phyllis. He was hardly the controlled headmaster one would expect.

Dana and Victor walked into the room. “We haven’t done anything wrong,” Dana insisted. “I sold Brewster a fine computer at a fair price. Anyone in the business will say the same. And if you are implying that we are involved in some grade-changing—which I just overheard—you’re

insane!”

“Then what are you doing here now, after school hours?” Friedbinder asked.

Phyllis stepped forward. “There was a message on my answering machine, saying that someone was going to sabotage the computer system this evening. I thought it was probably a crank call, but I couldn’t take the chance that it wasn’t on the level. I collected Dana, and we came right over.”

“Just in time to see the hard disk erase itself,” said Nancy. “Mr. Friedbinder, I think *you* have some explaining to do.”

“What!” he cried. “I—I—you’re in on this, too!” he sputtered.

“You know that’s a lie,” said Nancy, facing Friedbinder squarely.

Just then, a breathless Harrison Lane rushed into the office. “What on earth is happening here?” he asked.

“Ms. Drew seems to have lost her mind completely,” said Friedbinder. “Either that, or these three have induced her to join their sordid scheme.”

Turning to Nancy, Lane asked, “What is he saying?”

“He’s upset because I’ve accused him of being the phantom grade-changer,” Nancy told him, her eyes still on the headmaster. “Which he is.”

“What!” cried Harrison Lane.

“You can’t prove anything,” Friedbinder said at the same time. “Those records are completely lost. Erased.”

“No, not really,” said Dana. “At the end of each workday, the contents of the computer’s hard disk are automatically copied into a high-capacity tape cartridge. That way, no matter what happens, you can’t lose more than one day’s work. I’m surprised at you, Walter. Obviously you didn’t finish reading the user’s manual I provided.”

“Would those include a record of when and from where the command to erase the hard disk was entered?” Nancy asked.

Dana smiled. “Yes, they would.”

“I bet I can access those files right now,” said Victor, leaving the room.

“I find this hard to believe,” Lane put in. “Why would a man in Walter’s position do such a thing?”

“Greed,” Nancy suggested.

“I’ll sue you!” Friedbinder shouted. “You’d better watch your step, Ms. Drew!”

Victor returned to the office. “I won’t be able to get those records tonight. It’ll take too long.”

“That’s because there’s nothing to get,” said Friedbinder. “You have nothing on me.”

“I wouldn’t call these nothing,” said Nancy, pulling the yellow sheet of paper, the newspaper clipping, and the pad of computer notes from her pocket. “‘Sally Lane, one thousand dollars . . .’”

All the color drained from Walter Friedbinder’s face as Nancy read the list of students and the amounts he’d gotten from each of them. “Where did you get that?” he sputtered, his face purple. Without waiting for an answer, he lunged toward Nancy.

Nancy was ready for him, but before he reached her, Victor butted his shoulder into the headmaster’s chest. Friedbinder went flying backward and landed on the floor.

Harrison Lane examined Nancy’s evidence. “I don’t think we’ll be needing computer records,” he said. “You’ll be hearing from the board’s lawyer in the morning.”

“This is an outrage!” cried Friedbinder, climbing to his feet.

“No. Fraud, arson, extortion—those are outrages,” replied Lane.

Friedbinder flashed a furious gaze at Nancy. “I was on easy street,” he said, puffing his chest out arrogantly. “I had those kids so scared I knew they’d never tell anyone what was going on. And who would they blab to, anyway? Me, that’s who.” He let out a short, disdainful laugh. “Everything was going great—until you came along.”

His face red, he sneered, “If I’d had my way, you would have died in that fire, Nancy Drew! I planned to set it before you showed up. When I heard you go in early, I figured I might as well get you, and the evidence, out of the way at once. It was easy to pour that gasoline around the door without your hearing—you were so involved.”

“You mean, you were trying to kill Nancy?” Victor gasped. Grabbing the headmaster’s right arm, he twisted it behind his back, as if to ensure he wouldn’t try to make a run for it.

“Don’t worry, Victor,” Nancy told him. “Friedbinder’s not going anywhere for a long, long time.”

Chapter Sixteen

AT LUNCHTIME the next day Nancy walked into Phyllis Hathaway’s office. Phyllis, Dana, and Victor had been working there all morning, trying to retrieve the school’s erased files.

“Here she is now, our heroine!” cried Phyllis. Nancy had dropped her tutorial look and was wearing jeans and a large, soft cowl-neck sweater of deep blue.

Nancy laughed. “I’m just here to wrap up a couple of loose ends—and to say goodbye.”

“You should be proud of us, Teach,” said Victor. “We managed to save all the computer files.”

“While we were at it, we did some investigating of our own. Guess what we’ve discovered,” Dana added. “Walter was transmitting messages from his terminal, routing them to a midpoint terminal, sometimes two midpoint terminals, and then sending them to their final destination.”

“So I was right. That’s why the messages seemed to be coming from the newspaper room,” said Nancy.

“Well, guess what *I* found out this morning,” Nancy told them, leaning against Phyllis’s desk. “I called all three colleges mentioned in his resume. Not one of them has ever heard of Walter Friedbinder! He’s a complete fraud; never even graduated from college. Then I called the last school where he was headmaster. I told the new headmaster what had been going on, and he began going through *their* files. Guess why he had such a great reputation for bringing up the school’s academic performance?”

“He electronically doctored students’ records?” Phyllis guessed.

“Yep,” Nancy replied. “Apparently, the one thing he didn’t make up was his ability with computers, though we may never know how he got to be such a whiz.”

“Harrison Lane told me that he’s organizing a class-action suit against Friedbinder to get all the students reimbursed,” said Phyllis. “The board of trustees is suing him for fraud. Plus, he’ll probably be indicted for arson and attempted murder. I’d say he’s in for a whole lot of trouble.”

Dana chuckled softly. “Couldn’t happen to a nicer guy.” She patted her computer, adding, “All the students’ grades are back to what they were, thanks to PointTech’s brilliant back-up system.”

“Speaking of PointTech,” Nancy said to Phyllis, “are you still joining the company? You know, Brewster will probably ask you to be their head now.”

“They’ll have to ask someone else,” Phyllis told her. “It was a big step for me, but now that

I've made it, I can't go back. I'm leaving Brewster at the end of the month."

Nancy got up. "Well, good luck. I have to go now. I just wanted to say goodbye."

Victor's eyes locked with hers. "I'll walk you to your car," he said, getting to his feet and grabbing his jacket.

They walked out the front door of the school. It was a warm day. The thermometer had climbed into the low sixties, and a warm breeze rustled the vividly colored leaves on Brewster's campus. "Did you tell Phyllis what you told me last night about changing your friend's grade?" Nancy asked him as they walked.

"I did, this morning," Victor replied, grimacing slightly. "She said it wasn't fair to punish Phil for something he knew nothing about. Then she gave me a long lecture about ethics and technology, which I deserved, I guess. My punishment is to stay after school and work on getting those files back together until it's done."

Nancy gave him a sympathetic smile. "That's tedious work, isn't it?"

"Major tedious," he agreed.

They walked on in silence for a little while longer, until they reached Nancy's car. Opening the driver's door, Nancy threw her bag onto the passenger seat and climbed in behind the wheel.

Victor leaned down, resting his elbows on the open car window. "I hope you didn't come to say goodbye to me, too, Nancy," he said seriously. "I really want to see you again."

Nancy took in his handsome face, broad shoulders, and beautiful eyes. Then she sighed. "Victor, I told you about Ned. I like you, but—"

Victor stopped her words with a warm, tender kiss on the lips. "Victor, I can't," she said. "If it wasn't for Ned—"

Suddenly Victor looked under her car, then checked the back seat. He walked to the front of the car and checked under the hood. "What are you doing?" Nancy asked with an exasperated laugh.

"Looking for Ned," he answered, flashing her his disarming grin.

Nancy couldn't help playing along. "Ned isn't here," she told him.

Victor's grin grew even wider. "That's right," he said. "So I'm going to keep trying for you, Nancy Drew."