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CIRCULAR REASONING
by John P. Nordin

Chapter 1

It was just a circle. An almost closed curve, uneven, probably drawn with a stick or a finger, just a circle. A circle, just to one side of a body.

It took forever to float downward from standing to squatting. Standing, he had been investigating a case; kneeling he was immersed in sensation. Standing, the circle drawn in blood appeared a uniform dull red. As he knelt, the light from the far window reflected off the blood, making the circle glossy and sleek. Kneeling, he saw variations of color, an irregular surface and specks of dirt trapped in the coagulating liquid.

“Why kill this one,” he asked to the room.

“Why is this one special?”

He turned his head, registering the woman for the first time, and he was back in the world of humans. *Does it matter if he isn't special?* She was compassionate only with her clientele. Otherwise she was linear, hard. She didn't listen. She was young, but the young could hear, if they had suffered in the right way.

But she wasn't his problem. “Did the minister tell you anything?”

“Just religious shit. He has no connection to the victim. He was just hanging around. He was figuring out how many media outlets would interview him at the funeral.”

How should he respond? A dozen approaches flashed through his mind, each with some potential problem. So many assumptions to detect and resolve, including the off chance that referring to the media was yet another crack at him for not owning a TV. He found all this confusing. Now, solving the murder, that was simple. Or at least a game with rules that stayed put.

He stood, continuing to look at the circle of blood. “There are no living victims here. Should make your report simple.”

She bristled, “Trying to get rid of me?”

“I’d have no idea how to do that.”

She was field coordinator for victim advocacy. She should hand him the standard 56-point checklist and be on her way. She didn’t wear boots and a red checked flannel shirt, but whenever she spoke that’s what he saw.

“Is forensics on its way?”

“Five minutes, not that it’s my job to know. But there isn’t anything here.”

“There is a dead body.”

She said nothing. He left the living room of the doublewide mobile home, pushed open the screen door and went out onto the wooden landing outside. Around the edge of the landing was a small grill, some charcoal in a bag that looked like it had been outside during the last rain, and a very dirty basketball. None appeared to have been disturbed recently.

She pushed past him and clumped down the three creaky wooden steps to the cracked concrete walk. She called back to him. “So, I think he must have been a member of the Circle gang. Had a falling out with them, or something. Maybe he got cold feet about all the violence. So they did him in. Left the circle to make a point.”

Not that it's your job to know. “No one convicted for a Circle murder has ever been shown to have actually been a member of the Circle,” he said slowly, but not slowly enough to be detectable as a rebuke.

“They cover their tracks well. But they'll make a mistake eventually.”

“Much of their leadership is female.”

She looked at him sharply. But she was always looking sharply. All men are pigs, so to make it in a man's world, you must be the biggest pig of all. This is progress, and freedom and brings the revolution.

He shook his head. *Focus, Robert, focus.* But he kept being drawn to the blood, it had been so beautiful, such a striking unusual shade of color. And the texture, the surface sinking just the smallest amount as it seeped into the crack in the floor. But why was there a crack in the floor in a relatively new, prefabricated home? Not that it mattered.

As for details that did matter, why kill this person, a middle-aged male? Why kill a person who lived in a mobile home? For that matter, why kill him in the living room? There had been a lot of books and papers in the living room. Not much food in the refrigerator. And the man's glasses. They had been on the floor, a foot to one side of the body, where they had fallen as he'd fallen, falling backwards from the knife pushed between his ribs. The glasses were fine, almost delicate, and fashionable. Not the sort of thing to find on a man living in a double-wide in a trailer park literally on the wrong side of the tracks.

He used to like these puzzles, like them more than he ever admitted publicly. Which fact would prove important, and which not. But now, he had too many facts to deal with that were not part of the crime. He saw another fact making its way towards him.

The office manager stepped out of his car, retrieved his suit jacket hanging over the rear left hand window, adjusted his cuff links and smoothed his hair. He barked a command to the car and it locked itself, and dropped metal shields down over the tire wells. He strode over to meet the two of them. They didn't have precincts any more, they had offices. More 'accessible' or something. Frank was a major, but that was too militaristic, so they had titles like 'office manager' now. Except that they had still kept the ranks as well. Frank rapped the dark pad under his blazer pocket and the screen came to life and displayed his badge. He looked at them as if they were the criminals. "What have you got?"

Book'em Dan-o. Need to raise the chin a bit, looks better on TV. "A dead male, perhaps 35, 40. Knife killed him, weapon isn't here. Circle drawn in blood next to the body. No evidence of others living in the trailer. Neighbors saw nothing. The minister of the church at the end of the block saw nothing. Neighbors say he was a strange man."

"How strange? Stood up to the Circle terrorists? This dump would be prime organizing territory for them." He squinted at the neighboring mobile homes, daring them to terrorize him.

"Her theory is that he was in the gang, had a falling out. Retaliation killing."

"That would work."

Work for what? "The evidence of his strangeness is that he stayed up late, didn't talk about the weather, and has no known affinity with any sports team." *Shut up, Robert, shut up!*

They looked blankly at him. He smiled. "We really don't know what happened yet." He tried to sound cool, ironic, unaffected, normal. "Sam and Mindy are still canvassing the neighbors. Forensics isn't here yet." *So, please, don't make up your mind just yet. Wait an hour before you do; it makes it so much easier on us if you go with a story that fits at least some of the*

facts. Victim Advocacy asked for “a word” with the office manger and they walked out of earshot.

Philman wondered what would have happened if he had walked with them. He looked down the street in time to see a huge black SUV approach, pulling a black trailer. It was forensics.

Their massive unit barely fit between the parked cars on the narrow street. They drove up over the curb, but there wasn’t enough room for the 20-ft trailer. It sat at an angle, half on the scraggly grass, half on the street. Six technicians wearing black jump suits got out of the SUV and began to put on their helmets. He could hear them muttering into their helmet mikes. They stood in a circle nodding at each other, synchronizing their monitoring equipment by filming each other. They dispersed, two entering the trailer as three others unloaded equipment from an access panel on the side of the trailer. Their leader approached him.

“Nguyen. Technical lead. Fourth division, third team.”

“Philman. Detective lieutenant. Officer in charge. Third division.” *Single white depressed male. Doesn’t own a TV.*

The tech nodded.

“So where is the helicopter? Isn’t murder your priority any more? I suppose this is a bit tight to land in.”

“No, we’ve got that Adaptive Rotor Technology that lets us land in spaces like this.”

“Surprised you’re not using anti-gravs already.”

“I think you mean the Landing Recoil Hover Adaption? That is installed now.”

“So where is the helicopter?”

“The Major Case Airborne Rapid Response Unit is at a major law enforcement exposition in St. Louis.” The tech looked a little abashed. “And I assure you this case will get our full and detailed attention.”

Robert, he’s just doing his job. “I’m sure it will,” he said, practicing his gentle voice and remembering to smile.

“Understand it’s a Circle case.”

“There is a circle of blood by the body.” *It’s so beautiful, a shade of color I’ve never noticed before. And the glasses. Don’t forget to wonder about the glasses, they are so interesting you shouldn’t call them something ordinary like ‘glasses,’ let’s call them ‘spectacles’.*

“We’ll run our Circle protocols. Get a full analysis.”

“Yes, but it could be a diversion. Better do everything.”

The leader nodded eagerly at this good news, spun on his heels, and went up the three wooden steps and in the front door. Two of his crew were dragging thick cables from the trailer towards the house. Forensics brought their own power. Next year they were going to a wireless system that allowed their equipment to run by induction. *And probably fry their brains.*

He thought the cables meant something, but he couldn’t name it. He turned and saw another car approaching. It must be associated with the investigation, as it was far too sleek and stylish for this neighborhood. Who could it be, the shift captain? No, he drove some armored tank of a car. The driver parked on the grass next to the trailer. One technician flashed the car a dirty look, or so Philman supposed. The technician had on a helmet and a full visor, lightly smoked. But it was still a dirty look.

She got out. Or, he supposed, what he should think is “*She*” with quotes around it, italicized and capitalized. Tall and firm. Every day to the gym for that one. Black hair

cascading around a face that knew it could get its way by a glance. A skirt some distance above the knee, exposing long legs. Not that one should say her legs were exposed, no, she was one that gained power the more skin she showed. If she'd walked toward them naked, she could have commanded them to do anything, as they crumpled to the ground. He felt the flair up of desire, despite all the evidence he'd had that this was not what he should want. She strode up to him, extending a hand. How could an offer of a handshake be an aggressive act?

“Katarina Adler, media relations, and you are?”

He shook her hand. “Detective Lieutenant Robert Philman, officer in charge. There is no media here.”

“There will be. Do you know what happened?”

Another soul left this earth too soon and we are raping his house. “We’ve been here less than an hour. Forensics hasn’t even put their batteries in yet.” It sounded defensive. Making fun of forensics wasn’t the point. “So I guess we’re still in the stage of pursuing every lead, firmly committed to bringing the dangerous to justice, etc., etc.”

She gave him a smile that could freeze flame. “I didn’t know you had experience in media relations.”

“I’ve only watched the professionals from a distance.” Then, he added, more slowly, “There is a circle of blood next to the body, but many aspects of this don’t fit a Circle murder.”
So, please, don’t fence us in. Give us a chance.

“But you’ve only been here an hour. You must be very observant.”

“Ambiguity is easy to see.” That was pompous. *Why are we fighting? You don’t even want to talk to the media, she does, it’s a perfect solution.*

“Hello, Katarina, I’m office manager Cassidy, I’ve seen your work. You were very helpful on the last Circle case.”

The “last” Circle case, which would imply that this is the next one. Or is the office manager not capable of such grammatical intimation?

She gave the same smile to Cassidy. How can you smile in a way that conveys superiority? But he used your first name and didn’t volunteer his, and she’d know she was in a war. She fired the first salvo, insulting him by implying he wouldn’t do without prompting something he should do on his own. “I would find a full briefing *so* helpful before I told the media what you were doing.”

Cassidy put his arm around her shoulder and they walked off. Did she stiffen at his touch? Or was that a defiant pulling away? *Ah, it is possible to be so observant you see things that haven’t occurred yet.*

Of course, the man who knew nothing but had concluded everything would explain it all to the person whose job it was to stop the media from learning all the things the media should not be told. And this would be done out of hearing of anyone who might know anything. But the media would never ask the questions Philman would be afraid to answer out loud. Another perfect solution.

He was aware of a movement to his right. It was Sam and Mindy. He looked at Sam. Sam was old school, disdainful of all that wasn’t shoe leather and intimidating witnesses. Did he know that he was a cliché? Black hair oiled into place, always a white shirt and narrow dark tie and every shiny gray suit looked the same.

His partner of two years was Mindy, well-scrubbed, neat and tidy, a sensible brown bob of hair, perfectly clean blazer and a friendly expression.

Sam began. “Talked to nine neighbors. The deceased has lived here a couple of years. Quiet. Kept to himself. Worked as a security guard, and as a store clerk before that. Said he was a writer. Never showed what he’d written. Too liberal for some. Went to that church occasionally. Never been in a fight. Never dated anyone, or at least anyone around here.”

“In other words, we have no obvious motive.”

“No, which you probably like.”

“Oh, give me a simple case, let me be bored.” A pause. “Any indication of political activity? He was a writer. That used to be political.”

“No, once he got in an argument with someone on gun control. But if he did any political organizing, no one mentioned it.”

“Anyone mention the Circle specifically?”

“No one brought it up. We didn’t either.”

“Mindy, would the junior officer like to avail herself of the dissent channel to voice any of the valuable opinions that might be suppressed by an well-meaning, but inadvertently intimidating senior officer?”

“Oh my goodness no. Sam gave a good summary of what we both found. Anyway, he says I intimidate him.” Sam turned his head, shrugged dramatically, and spat on the ground. That particular memo, training session and reporting requirement had been less popular than usual.

“We all know this doesn’t fit the Circle MO, assuming there actually is one. This guy is no corporate executive, no politician. Are we starting to get copy-cat killings now?”

“Why not,” Sam grunted, “already been two Internet movies using the idea.”

“I had no idea you stayed up on popular culture, Sam.”

Mindy laughed. “You forgot Robert; that was the training session when you had the flu.” She straightened her shoulders and began to recite. “An exchange of opinions on a neutral subject may develop the atmosphere of trust necessary for officers of different social backgrounds or genders to work effectively together.”

“What a fortunate illness. Anyone notice any recent change in the deceased’s routine?”

“No they didn’t.” Sam said.

“Any girlfriends?”

“Nothing yet.”

“Boyfriends?”

“No.”

“Any friends?”

“No one noticed any visitors. No one heard anything. No one didn’t see nothing about nothing.”

“So we are at the tender mercy of forensics once again.”

“God help us all,” Sam said.

Media relations and office manager returned. Cassidy spoke, but Philman had the impression it was only because Adler allowed him too. “Gentlemen. And ladies. This could be sensitive.” He deepened his voice and leaned in towards them. “We’ve got a working class neighborhood. Probably a lot of resentments stacked up here looking for an excuse to explode, a hotbed of underground Circle activity. We’ve got Circle involvement. We’ve got no immediate identification of the killer. We’ve got to show progress quickly before this gets messy and sucks up our resources. For all we know, someone wants us to spend time here to keep us from seeing

the real situation.” He glanced back and forth, raising an eyebrow, extending his index finger, to see if they’d all been carefully listening.

Sam and Mindy, nodded sagely and said, “yessir.” *How I wish I knew how to tug on my forelock and pledge my obedience. Sam and Mindy, you are so much wiser than I.*

“We think forensics will be key.” *Golly, I can shuck and jive once in a while, if I practice.*

“I think that is very insightful. We will leave the details to you. Keep us informed. Katarina will handle the media.” And they were off, Frank looking at Katarina, reaching his hand for her elbow, she looking straight ahead.

Victim Advocacy dropped off her disk with her report and collected Robert’s signature. Sam and Mindy took off as well, leaving Robert to await for forensics to finish.

For the moment he was alone. He looked around at the neighborhood. The victim’s trailer backed onto the edge of the trailer park. Across the street were a row of small homes. At one time they would have radiated hope, starter homes for hard-working families on their way to the American Dream. Now, they looked weather-beaten and sullen, adorned with rusting cars out front, lop-sided grills on the front lawn, one house with a bunch of signs in the front yard, one with beer cans.

He noticed that no one was standing around watching them. He couldn’t be sure, but it didn’t appear that there was anyone even looking at them from behind the curtains. Usually there were onlookers, gawking, offering advice, informing everyone that they had predicted the whole thing. And children, usually a few children, often with a forensics-style helmet or toy evidence camera playing at being an adult.

He found the emptiness chilling, as chilling as if there had been a funeral for the man and no one had come. Weren't they curious about this murder? And did no one grieve the dead man? And then there was the curious phone call alerting them. Made from an actual payphone where, he already knew, there was no surveillance camera. If the deceased lived by himself, and never interacted with the neighborhood, why would anyone think that two days without seeing him was worth a call to the police? He'd bet that they'd never trace the voice either.

Eventually, forensics exited the trailer. Their leader trotted over to Philman and almost saluted. "We've completed our Preliminary Crime Scene Survey with a standard scan and special protocols for suspected homicide and suicide as well as the terrorism checklist with Circle specificity. We've collected 487 samples, 4,921 images and 157 minutes of video." He offered Philman a computer disk.

So what did you see? Who do you think killed him? But it was not forensics' job to conclude, just to collect. Collecting involved no risks; a conclusion, now that meant making a decision.

"I have received your Preliminary Crime Scene Survey on the suspicious death at 4572 E. 216th at 1621." He announced formally for the still running video camera next to the team leader's head. A black-gloved hand slapped a button on the front of his chest, turning off the camera. The team ebbed back to their trailer and departed. A few minutes later the coroner's team arrived in a large truck and removed the body, also passing a disk of their report to Philman on the way out. Still later a car with two beat cops showed up to monitor the crime scene overnight. They'd leave tomorrow unless Philman told them to stay.

Gradually the voices faded and he was wrapped in silence. He slowly scanned each part of the exterior of the mobile home. No sign of forced entry, no fresh exterior dings, no messy

residue of violence. He still held the disks from Forensics, the Medical Examiner and Victim Advocacy. The department kept the tradition of a disk hand-over even though he'd get the same reports via email by the time he got back to the office. He held the disks like small jewels rubbing his hands over the smooth surface. The exterior of the disks gave no more information than the exterior of the trailer.

He went back to the office.

Chapter 2

That night he was listening to the baseball game when the phone rang. A properly cynical police detective, he thought, should be listening to some obscure classical composer and drinking whiskey. He preferred baseball, another game with rules that stayed put, more or less.

He reached over to the side table and turned off his radio. He was sitting in his black leather recliner, positioned so he could look out the windows to the back yard. Picking up the phone, he was surprised to hear a woman's voice, and even more surprised when it identified itself.

"Philman? Katarina Adler. Why don't you think it's a Circle case?"

I'm fine, and how are you? "Eight people have been convicted for ten murders termed 'Circle cases,' but none of those convicted, nor none of those murdered, have ever actually been proven to be a member of the Circle." *And did I say you could call me out of office hours?*

"That doesn't prove that a different murder wouldn't be a Circle case."

"True, it's only evidence against the theory that we have a chain of murders and thus should be expecting others. Then there's the fact that the death of an obscure person, not involved in politics, hardly fits the profile for an organization that thinks that large corporations are ..."

"Retaliation killing. Diversion."

"There's no evidence of that."

"Is there any evidence pointing against it?"

None of your friends call you 'Kat' do they? "Against conspiracy theories, the facts themselves are powerless."

There was an instance of silence. “What’s your theory then?” Her voice was quick, precise. Not angry, not sneering, just efficient.

“At the moment, I don’t have one because the facts don’t yet suggest one. It is very easy to draw a circle on the floor. The circle could be an accident. It could be a copy-cat killing. It could have been intended to mean something else entirely. And yes, an organization that claims the rich are the source of our problem, and corporations evil, has been willing to be killed rather than do violence, and whose members have gone on hunger strikes in jails rather than eat meat may well have killed an impoverished writer of unpublished poems, but I’m not going to start with that assumption.”

He realized that some edge of emotion had crept into his voice, which he normally tried to keep absolutely level. He put his hand over his eyes. In the silence, he continued softly, “why is it so important for this to be a Circle case?”

“Now it’s you that doesn’t get it.”

I didn’t say you didn’t get it, not directly.

“The worst thing you can tell the media,” she said, “is ‘I don’t know.’ Being wrong is far less trouble.”

“How glad I am that you will handle that.”

“You think that’s the wrong way to handle it?”

“Well, the sort of wrong I’d do would be far more trouble.” *Why are you talking to me at all? Why now?*

“I’m holding a press conference tomorrow at 10am. Let me know before then if you’ve got any specifics.” And she hung up without saying goodbye. He put the phone down and looked at it for a second.

She'd caught the distinction that should the theory about a chain "Circle cases" be proved false, it would not count against any affirmative evidence that suggested that this new case was a Circle case. Interesting he thought, that she'd made that distinction. She might also understand a related distinction: that previous convictions for a crime were not proof that the person had committed one more. But then, she might also point out that there were the usual exceptions for cases where the prior bad acts had some specific relevance to the current accusation.

He stopped, smiled at himself. She might get that distinction, but she wasn't likely to be *fascinated* by it. To the room he said, "so maybe you're not just a pretty face after all."

He picked up the radio, turned it on and got up and went out onto his back deck. A foot above the lawn, it was bordered by low built in benches. He'd added some planters, and one year had flowers in them, but they were bare now. He lay down, full on his back on the deck and looked up at the first stars becoming visible against the deep blue darkening sky.

Forensics' official preliminary report into the murder of one Mr. Carl K. DuBois had thudded onto his computer by the time he'd returned from the crime scene. It began with a three dimensional map of the trailer that he could view from any angle or walk through by moving his mouse. At various points the cursor rolled over hot spots and by clicking he could pull up data on that part of the trailer. Moving virtually into the living room you would encounter an animated 3D simulation showing the likely location of the body before it fell, its path as it fell, and giving a 55 percent probability that the killer was between 5'8" and 6'1". Then they ran that against the distribution of heights by gender to show that it was more likely to be a male who committed the crime. *Great, we can now rule out dwarfs, Martians and NBA players. Can't absolutely rule out soccer moms.*

By snaking his way through four menus, he could turn that display off and read a linear narrative. By disabling the default options he was able to print it out. Nine DNA samples, analyzed in the portable lab in the trailer, had proven to within one chance in 23.8 trillion that the deceased was the same person his driver's license, mailbox name and credit cards said he was. 61 fingerprints all matched the deceased with greater than a 99.5 percent probability except for one that was only 70 percent certain to be DuBois. This partial print from the bathroom had driven forensics into a fury of effort to resolve the remaining uncertainty, without success.

There was information on the force required to open each window, fingerprints on the inside and exterior, and the results of modeling to estimate how many times they'd been opened in the past week leading to the conclusion that the intruder did not come in through a window.

The victim's routine had been assessed by wear patterns in the carpet, residual compression of seat cushions, finger print distributions on the wall, the pattern of scratches on surfaces and skin oil residue on light switches, furniture and kitchen cabinets. Much to the amazement of all, it appeared that Mr. DuBois ate, watched TV, worked at the computer, went to the bathroom, walked in the hallway and slept in his bed. A change in routine recently could not be ruled out, nor could it be proven.

Philman was always impressed by the specialization of career paths in Forensics. This case had brought in a number of them, including the domestic dirt expert. The team had picked up samples from the doorjambs, the carpets, between the sofa cushions, in cracks in linoleum, under the fridge, behind the toilet, at the back corner of closet shelves, on the window sills, as well as from shoes and a dozen places outside the trailer for comparison. Beyond that, stale potato chips, bits of orange peels, an apple stem, a small pin, a dried cracker, dust bunnies, all had come under scrutiny and the expert had concluded that there was no real evidence that

anything in the house had come from outside the immediate neighborhood that couldn't be attributed to being tracked in by DuBois. Still no evidence of their murderer.

Cores taken from the trailer's walls and floor were presented, described and analyzed. Samples from the trap under the kitchen sink and the bathroom were compared. Apparently he'd once brushed his teeth in the kitchen sink. No drug residue was found in either sample. They had also reached into the toilet to extract scrapings from the trap there. All showed no signs of residue from anyone other than Mr. DuBois. The distribution of parasites was as expected. No one else lived there, no had recently spent enough time in the trailer to use the sink, the toilet or the bathroom.

Hair and fluid residue from the bed had been collected and investigated and there was no sign of urine, vaginal fluid or blood and only DuBois' semen. There was no sign he'd recently shared the bed with anyone else. Shoes had a chapter all to themselves, as did the rest of the victim's clothes. All the clothes were the proper size for the victim. Philman couldn't bring himself to read every single word of the report, but he was pretty sure that they had found nothing from any other person.

Because he'd been killed with a knife, forensics had investigated every knife in the house, looking for trace evidence, attempting to discover if a knife might be missing. A butcher block stand in the kitchen with two empty slots got several pages of attention, but it appeared from the pattern of gunk in the slots that that no knife was missing. A list of the 59 known types of knives that could potentially match the wounds were provided as well as the standard lamentation that no law had been passed mandating unique serration patterns for all knives.

Philman read the paragraphs about the glasses over and over. DuBois' glasses were a designer brand, inconsistent with the dead man's clothes, housing and occupation. They had

delicate, thin frames made from an advanced composite material, which held lenses with several specialized coatings. The lenses themselves were equally advanced, very lightweight, having the finest optical properties. Well, the dead man had been a poet, perhaps wanting to see clearly was not that surprising.

Philman stretched a time or two and adjusted the compact radio on his chest. The announcer's voices floated out, resuming their account of an at-bat. He liked these announcers, their voices were easy, they knew when to be silent. He could listen to them night after night and not find them grating.

Forensics had also attacked the computer in the trailer. A laptop, two or three years out of date, it was filled with downloaded documents on a myriad of subjects from domestic political issues, foreign policy, history, impressionist art, animal behavior, court decisions and the publishing industry. There was nothing on sports, cars or women.

The documents had all been read into various political analysis programs that were among forensics' most guarded secrets. Only the most general conclusions were made available to Philman; if he wanted more, he'd have to make a formal request. Forensics wasn't supposed to come to conclusions, but their report fairly itched with the desire to label the writer a leftist agitator. That is, forensics concluded that the poet thought sex was not evil and poor people were often screwed by the political system. The absence of anything remotely recreational, at least as defined by norms for a male of that age, also excited forensics, they thought it was very important.

The half-inning concluded and the radio station went to commercial. Sam and Mindy would be surprised to know that their allegedly anti-technology boss had an illegal piece of technology on his radio that suppressed commercials. Standard mute buttons with timers had

first been attacked by stations going to random length commercials. Then decoder circuits had been added to radios that went online via wireless, cracked the encrypted signal that broadcasters were using to coordinate commercial length with remote broadcasts, and suppressed the volume for the required time. These had been ruled illegal, an unconstitutional censorship of an advertiser's right to be heard. Now they were only available on the black market from web sites hosted on pirate ships and constantly traveling vans. Philman had found one of these and purchased the circuitry and program.

Forensics had not found any personal connections in all the dead man's files that had anything to do with either family or politics. No personal correspondence at all. No friends, casual e-mail, no phone numbers, blog postings, nothing. That was unusual, way off the charts. Beneath the officially descriptive prose, forensics' utter disapproval poured from every syllable. Or so Philman thought, but maybe he imagined this sort of thing.

Philman had already determined that the dead man had no local family and only two brothers, both halfway across the country. There was no evidence that he spoke with them. He'd still have to tell Victim Advocacy.

This remoteness was consistent, at least, with the absence of family correspondence. There was nothing to lovers, old or current, nothing related to a hobby, and certainly nothing related to any political groups. Lots on political ideas, but nothing on any groups, terrorist, political, religious or social.

Philman had ordered a trace of Internet Service Providers, both the one the dead man directly communicated with and its primary connections. Philman had checked the little box on the electronic warrant application web-form that said "terrorism related" and it conveniently popped up a form with the eighteen most popular terrorism related justifications. All he had to

do with click on “Suspected Circle Gang involvement,” and the form went to the top of some judge’s email pile. An hour later, Philman had his warrant and the police computer had already sent it to the appropriate automated agents at the Service providers who would conduct a search.

The Service Providers were required to retain three days worth of all message traffic. Some of that would be encrypted in ways even the police couldn’t crack. Appeals to various corporations would produce decrypts of some of it, or at least sworn statements that nothing had been found relating to the murder. It might produce something, although even the dumbest criminals knew about the three-day requirement and often stopped communicating for that period before committing a crime. One had already been convicted on the strength of what he hadn’t used the net for, the theory being that not using the Internet for three days was sufficiently odd that it was evidence of criminal intent.

The search warrant to the Internet Service Provider had also had been sent to the phone company for DuBois’ phone records. All Philman had needed to do was check another couple of boxes on the “Integrated Warrant Application Process” screen and off it had gone. But DuBois hardly used his phone at all. *So, you still had a landline. Well, you are a radical for sure now.*

The radio resumed as Philman’s team came to bat in the bottom of the 7th, trailing by one run. It was a close, low-scoring game, full of the pleasant tension that made the sport intriguing. He loved the isolated world of the diamond, able still to block out the corporate complications that constantly threatened to consume the sport. The game followed paths. A 2-1 count could only be followed by a limited number of things, a ball, strike, a hit, an out, and a few rarer possibilities like an argument. It couldn’t be followed by a 1-1 count or a strikeout. Even the arguments of baseball were formalized, occurring for a limited number of reasons. And yet, the game had infinite variety using these limited choices. A team could be behind, no runners, two

outs, two strikes, a second from extinction, yet the inning could go on for several batters, in theory forever.

And the blood on the floor. Forensics had been determined to find a pattern connecting the shape of this circle with previous Circle cases based on its shape, thickness, direction of drawing, something. Chopping his way through the jungle of statistical prose mixed with police writing, Philman concluded that forensics had failed to make a link. Other than that the blood belonged to the writer. And that the circle had been drawn with some sort of “object inconsistent with animated organic matter” which Philman thought meant that a stick was still possible, but that a finger had been ruled out, at least a live finger. Drawn clockwise, this apparently was more consistent with a socially well-adjusted individual than with a psychopath.

Philman put the radio on the deck and sat up, his arms around his knees. No matter how carefully he’d read the report, it all added up to an exceptionally clean crime scene. He’d have to read the autopsy report which would have more of the same, but somehow, all that language was harder to take when it described a person. *Ninety pages and we’ll learn he was killed with a knife.* Sam and Mindy hadn’t found anything among the neighbors yet, either.

Baseball was soothing to listen to. There were many indications that the declining audience for a voice-only description was going to lead to the canceling of radio broadcasts entirely in favor of Internet based integrated video and web presentations. Philman didn’t want to watch the game, he wanted to hear it. And he wanted to hear the announcers, not the sound effects, the views of D-list stars and yelps from average fans that were regularly included now. Maybe he’d have to listen to archives of past games he never heard the first time around, but he didn’t think that would be as satisfying.

His team tied the game in the 7th, lost the lead in the 8th to a solo home run and did not come back. Game over. That was that. Philman turned off the post game commentary, if he'd solved the case, he could take listening to explanation of an activity without profit, but he'd had enough for one day.

He went inside and saw the phone. Why had Katarina called him at home? Was she concerned he wouldn't get to work in time for her to get input for her press conference? Was the media that hot on her trail? Was she going to be a nagger, bugging him repeatedly for everything? He could block her phone, but that would probably trigger some sort of protest. He'd collect more evidence before deciding what category to put her in. *Maybe she just couldn't stand not to hear my voice.* He laughed.

So what was his next move on this case? He could play Buddha and talk Zen about being still until the case came to him, he'd regularly driven his staff mad with that attitude, but this case wasn't going to fall into his lap. And the absence of obvious directions to pursue, combined with what Katarina's actions said about likely media pressure ... *Focus, Robert, focus. Just keep working the system.*

Chapter 3

In the office the next morning, Philman worked on the case, mindful of needing, or wanting, to call Katarina. He noticed it was 9:30 and reached for the phone. He stopped. Almost no one used the phone any more. He opened his desk drawer and pulled out a little cheat sheet he'd written up. Consulting it, it clicked open the videophone connection on his computer. Checking the sheet before each click, he eventually completed a call to her. She answered.

“... so while his writings had political dimensions to them, there is as yet, no evidence linking him to the Circle, or indeed, to any specific political group,” he concluded.

“You're not giving me much,” she said, in the brisk, abrupt style that was already feeling familiar to him. She was looking directly and unblinkingly at him.

“I really don't have much yet. Analysis of the phone call, and of net traffic may give something. His income and tax records may give us something as well.”

“What's your read on this; do you think you'll solve it?”

“You know better than to ask that.”

“You know I'll be asked that.”

“In two days, we'll have those analyses I mentioned.”

“That's answering a different question. What about the autopsy?”

“Only preliminary results in. He was killed with a knife, which we don't have.”

“Is it likely you'll have a suspect in two days?”

“I can't say that.”

“What's your guess?”

“Murders are usually solved immediately or not at all, you know that.”

“I'll never say that. That suggests that the police don't actually do anything.”

“I’d say that in only one case in five does the quality of our work matter. The rest, anyone could solve - or not solve.”

“Thank God you’re not permitted to talk to the media.”

“I wasn’t aware it was an actual prohibition.”

“Keep me informed.” She hung up, the screen went blank, the office silent.

He felt angry with himself. Dancing with her just made him appear to be a flake or a troublemaker, personalities he didn’t respect and was desperately trying to avoid being labeled with. Be professional, calm, just the facts ma’am.

He hoped the autopsy didn’t have anything else in it, because he had only given it a quick read to see if there was anything urgent. If there was some bombshell in there he’d look foolish to her if he found out later that he’d left out something important. He pulled up the preliminary report and started reading it. Subject was 34 years old, not at risk of a heart attack, no tumors, no interesting injuries other than he’d broken his arm as a youth. 5’11”, slightly overweight for perfect health, normal level of muscle tone and volume. Blood levels normal, cholesterol was normal, liver function normal, thyroid level normal, neurotransmitters normal. Had all his organs, no major surgeries, no chronic illnesses, a normal sperm count. Had eaten fruit for dinner, apparently. Genetic predisposition to loose his hair. *What does any of this have to do with the murder?* Calm down, he told himself, cases have been solved on this.

Blood alcohol was zero. Preliminary tox screen was negative for 23 common drugs. Skin showed no needle marks. No residue of sniffing anything.

He clicked on the chapter labeled “Exogenous Trace Evidence Associated with Discenent.” There was a lot of it. DuBois’ hair had several kinds of mites, dust from several locations, natural minerals, paper fiber, clothing fiber, and several trace heavy metals common in

carpets. All the stuff any person had and all linked to substances in DuBois' house, or so generic as to be unhelpful.

Philman turned to the lengthy section on the wound. There was page after page on the location, speed, force of the thrust, the single, fatal, thrust that ended his life, be it a happy or frustrating one. Knife wounds still couldn't be reliably matched to specific knives. Forensics offered the opinion that the blade was 4 to 6 inches long, was single sided, but couldn't rule out a double-sided knife due to wound tearing. Most likely a non-serrated knife, but the body reacted to being wounded, tissues moving and shifting and they couldn't be completely sure. The knife was not likely moved or twisted in the wound. Firm to strong pressure seemed to have been applied by the murderer, the wound was deep - but that could be due to an exceptionally sharp knife. There was really no way of knowing if the knife had come from the DuBois trailer or the murderer had carried it in with him.

Death had not been instantaneous, nor would DuBois have been rendered unconscious immediately. Philman kept imagining those moments. While all knife wounds were not necessarily fatal, they would all have to be painful, very painful. After DuBois fell to the floor on his back was he surprised, angry, in despair? He'd be lying on the floor of own house, looking up at the murderer, gasping in pain. The murderer, did he wait for DuBois to go unconscious, did he clean up the scene?

The wound had no blood or trace materials that didn't belong to the deceased. No other wounds than the single knife thrust. A couple of blood splatters but all from the wound itself. In other words, no sign of a fight.

No trace evidence from the murder weapon itself had been found. It had not nicked a rib, not been covered with some substance that transferred to the internal organs. Not even oil was on the blade, apparently. That might be a way of profiling the murderer.

Not one molecule had transferred to DuBois. That was unusual, but not unprecedented. It was too bad, even a bit of a molecular match for the blade of the knife would be invaluable once they had an identified suspect.

Had DuBois reacted? There were no defensive wounds on his fingers or arms. No evidence that he'd tried to grab the wound, his hands were not very bloody. He'd fallen back and in his last seconds of consciousness had not been trying to fight off his attacker. What had he been thinking of? Was he so surprised, the feelings so unique and different from the rest of his life? Had he fixed on some detail of the rug, the sensation of warm blood on the skin? Perhaps being a writer rather than an action hero meant that instead of crawling, twisting, yelling, he was moved to be writing a poem as he died, interpreting this pain, this opening to infinity? Cursing his passivity?

There was some cigarette smoke residue in his hair. DuBois didn't smoke, Philman knew that. So either he'd been someplace with smoke, or someone who smoked had been talking to him. The report indicated that DuBois' contact with the smoke was most likely to have been no more than a day or two prior to the murder. Could they identify the brand of cigarette? Forensics had ruled out cigars, pipes and several forms of specialty cigarettes but what was left was the standard tobacco mix that was sold to several companies and used in more than a dozen popular brands that the majority of smokers purchased.

Forensics was in a tizzy that medical records for DuBois had not been found and they devoted six pages to explaining why this was not their fault. Maybe he didn't go to the doctor; poor people don't.

So a single thrust of the knife, without much in the way of preliminaries, perhaps. No struggle, no fight. Not a killing of passion that produced a frenzy of thrusts. Nothing very much disturbed in the trailer either, so that was consistent. It was possible that some of DuBois' blood had splattered on to the murderer and if they ever found him or her, they might use that to prove the connection.

Time of death was 11 to 11:30 pm, or at least with 67% probability, a 95% possibility for it being 10:20pm to 12:10 am. The absence of trace evidence from any other person suggested the murder had not been in the house long before the crime. So no drinking party that got out of hand, DuBois had no alcohol in him anyway. Useful, but again, nothing to match it with.

There wasn't even a fiber on DuBois' shirt that didn't belong there or to the carpet or to his other clothes. Philman pulled his eyes away from the computer screen, blinking once or twice. *What are we missing?* He looked at the clock and realized what time it was.

He didn't watch news conferences by police spokespersons, not even the ones for his cases, but for some reason he wanted to see hers. He went to the precinct website and fired up the streaming media for the press conference. She turned his "two days to get the analysis back" into a dynamic, aggressive plan by a police force that would leave no computer unturned to find the killer. He was impressed, and not the least by the fact that she never actually lied.

Sam had been detailed to track down the mysterious call informing them of the murder, and he came to Robert's office to talk instead of calling him on the videophone. Sam was odd that way.

“This call is odd. He goes to the trouble of finding a phone booth, and one that doesn’t have a surveillance camera. He turns off the videophone link. Leaves no fingerprints on the booth, though there is some evidence it was wiped down. And get this: his voice is disguised.” Sam had settled his tall, lean frame into a chair in front of Philman’s desk.

“Plenty of anonymous tipsters do that.”

“You’re out of date. We don’t get many anonymous tips any more. Everyone wants the reward and wants to know how many media outlets we’ll contact for them and if we will release images from their interview to their agents. But here’s the rub: the disguise is not just a hand over the mouth or an accent. It’s electronic. Maybe not even a real voice at all, computer-generated. Totally digital.”

“No background noise?”

“None, he used the wireless connection to go from a computer, or smart phone or something.”

“But went to a physical phone to do that, not the net?”

“Yup.”

“Can we detect which digital source? Which computer program?”

“No. No match at all.” Sam sounded depressed.

“Then by his perfect preparations our caller has made his first mistake.”

“Don’t start in on the Zen Buddha detective shit.”

“I mean that if we don’t have a record of a residual match to the digital spectrum of the call, that means the call was generated by someone using a classified program and that is most likely a government agency.” Robert hadn’t meant to jump so quickly to that big a conclusion.

“What!?! That’s a huge leap.”

I'll slow down. “If the call was a neighbor who didn’t want to get involved, even a neighbor who knew computers, they’d still have used some commercial voice synthesis package. We’d know which one. Still wouldn’t tell us who actually used it, but we’d know which package. The only packages we can’t track are ones the government doesn’t want us to know about.”

“That’s a lot to conclude.” Sam twisted his face, raising one eyebrow. It was an effective interrogation technique, Philman thought. At least it made him feel uncomfortable.

“I know, but the absence of a signature match is quite revealing.”

“How do you know those secret programs haven’t leaked out to the public yet?”

“Well, I suppose I haven’t checked lately, so look into it, but I do think that is remarkable.” *So I leapt too far.*

“What about programs corporations have developed and kept secret?”

“I thought that Patriot Act III required those to be registered? Oh, but the registration is kept secret as well, so we’re still out of luck.”

“Can’t you order up a comparison?”

“Yes, I can get the voice file run against all the corporate programs – for a fee which we can’t afford unless I can get a waiver by showing a preponderance of evidence that there will be a match.”

“Hey, this is terrorism related.”

Philman looked at Sam, trying to judge that comment. Philman wouldn’t hesitate to play the system and say that to get information, but Sam meant it for real, most likely.

“It’s going to be a hard sell, the call isn’t a threat, it’s reporting a murder. And the murdered guy isn’t an official target or part of a group – well I can’t prove that either yet,” he added as Sam stirred.

“You could still try - the case is terrorism related if not the call itself.”

“The case is suspected terrorism related, I guess, but I’m not sure why.”

“The circle by the body,” Sam said, patiently.

Why was he always ignoring that? “It raises a question, but we don’t have anything else that points that way.”

Sam shrugged.

“Besides, if I claim a terrorism connection, it’s true the fee gets waived, but I have to submit an application and there is a fee for that -- a smaller fee, but one I still have to go to finance to get authorized.”

“How hard is that?”

“Depends if it is over my signature authority. I’ll have to look that up.”

He shook his head. Sam shrugged again.

“The call came from a physical phone, one of the very few left out there,” Philman said to move onto another topic. “Why didn’t he start the call over the net? Why actually go to a phone booth?”

“He’s trying to avoid any traces that would link back to his own computer.”

“He could have used a library or common access point.”

“Under surveillance.”

“Right. So this wasn’t an impulse activity, most likely. The guy is very careful. He doesn’t want to be found. Makes it more likely to be the killer then and less likely to be a witness. By the way, did you check with that mutual masturbation place next to the booth?”

“‘Pleasure Ahoy’, you mean? I thought I’d leave that for you.”

Seeing Robert’s look, Sam continued. “No, of course I went there immediately. What a throwback. Dim lighting, tacky rooms with loud music. That Lysol smell. And incomplete surveillance.”

“Did you get a client list?”

“Signed the proper waivers, and yes. But their surveillance is so incomplete internally, it might not be everyone. One client entered two minutes after the phone call.”

“Interesting. Would it be too much to hope that this is our caller?”

“If it is, our caller is 48 years old, looks like a spy, but isn’t.”

“Yes?”

“Guy’s name is Jack J. Jackson, VP of a car dealership. He checks out.”

“As what?”

“As a guy who works at a car dealership.”

“What do you mean, looks like a spy?”

Sam showed Philman a picture. It was a lean, hard-looking man with short hair. The face would be at home in a uniform, perhaps one with swastikas.

“What is he VP of, at the dealership?”

“You mean he doesn’t look like a sales guy? We’ll check, if you think it matters.”

It was Philman's turn to shrug. "It could. This is the only person we've got to look at so far. Approach him; ask him if he saw anything at the phone booth. See if you get a reaction to the sex parlor thing being known."

"You forgot, we signed the waivers. Promised confidentially. We need probable cause for a direct link before we can mention the club to him. That means a court trip."

"Crap, we need to talk to him. I still don't get that rule. We promise not to use information in order to obtain it; and we obtain it because we need to use it."

"We can use the info, we just can't invade his privacy by mentioning it to him."

"So we can know something private about him, but we can't tell him about it. Isn't that worse"?

Sam waited Philman out.

"Sam, how can you talk to him about the phone call without mentioning the sex club?"

"That's why I'm not a lieutenant. That's the sort of thing you figure out."

"How carefully we protect the rights of the citizen. Truly, ours is a noble calling."

"I am allowed, however, to slap the hooker around a bit."

"You mean the sex industry worker."

"You mean the disadvantaged child of an abusive family." Sam must have been listening to Mindy.

"Did she have sex with him?"

Sam consulted his notebook. It was actually made of leather and had paper note pages in it. "Her name is Sabrina. Or at least, that is her officially registered alias, Sabrina NF27 to be exact. Another court trip to get the actual name. No, Sabrina says she did not. She doesn't do

that, it's illegal and you might catch something. She did a strip show and he masturbated.

Perhaps we could send forensics in to sniff the semen on the floor and confirm his DNA."

"And infer the size of his cock, which we could then compare to the size of other cocks of car dealers that we have in our cock database. No, no, no, let's save forensics for things that are truly important."

Philman thought for a second. "Sam, get court permission to talk to the car dealer. We just have to pony up and do it. I'll sign the request. The problem is, we ask him about the call, and after he says no, then what do we do?"

"We ask if he saw anything odd regarding the phone booth. And watch his reaction."

"I know, I know, but what are we trying to find out?"

"You think too much. We ask him and see if he gets embarrassed, blurts out something that gives us something more to go on."

"He works in a car dealership; he doesn't get embarrassed."

Sam shrugged. "We ask him if he saw anyone else."

"OK. I know we need to talk to him. Do the court thing. Oh, and see who else visited the strip parlor in the last week."

*

Mindy phoned him later that day but did it from her computer. Philman hit the wrong keys for the video phone and had to cancel out of some other program, think, and start over.

Then he forgot to turn on his microphone. Mindy was nice enough not to comment.

"Couple of things. Sam interviewed Sabrina again, I'll send you his stuff. Nothing new there. We decided to switch off assignments and I took a run at a couple of neighbors to get some ideas on researching DuBois' life."

And you're so glad you work for a boss who doesn't even comment at changes you don't check with him about. "OK."

"So, I did get a couple of neighbors to talk about Carl DuBois, or am I required to call him the 'deceased'?"

"Excessive personalizing of investigatively relevant persons risks the investigator forming emotions concerning said relevant person which presents a significant risk of clouding the sterility of the investigator's judgment," Philman quoted from some manual.

"'Cloud the *objectivity*,' is what it said. But anyway, I've picked up a few tidbits. DuBois was out a lot at night – a neighbor saw him come back late, so that person has him visiting bars just based on that."

"Any specific bars?"

"No, not even a false accusation. Another neighbor said he liked to climb up on top of his trailer at night and lie down."

Just like me. "Did he like baseball?"

"What? How did you get there? No, apparently DuBois claimed he was viewing the stars, but the neighbor is suspicious."

"Suspicious of what?"

"That DuBois was being suspicious – and yes, I remember your speech about suspicion requiring an object."

"You can be suspicious *about* something, but not just have free-floating suspicion."

"You know what people mean by it."

"If you say a person is suspicious, then it can mean that you find them disreputable or offensive, but if you don't name the nature of the suspicion, then you have said nothing at all."

“I KNOW this.”

“Is lying on the ground at night a Circle stunt? Was he communicating with Circle leaders on Mars? No one has ever proved that they don’t have a base there.”

“The POINT is that the neighbor was watching him, and yet didn’t really know his habits or really know much about him.”

“Well, this really narrows down the suspects.”

“I know, I know. But, think about it, these neighbors didn’t even know his e-mail address, and given all the community promoting activities of the government, that means he actively blocked it.”

“Proof he’s an anti-social member of the criminal Circle Conspiracy!”

“Robert, please. Some of us actually work here.”

Philman stopped for a second, somewhat stunned by the implications of that. *I guess I’ve been making too many snide remarks. But I thought you liked the banter.* If only thinking were visible then it would count as work. “As we work through these protocols, we’re not discovering much in the way of motive,” he said by way of ignoring her comment.

“Perhaps the absence of motive is the real clue.”

“I suppose I deserved that.”

“Yes.” She shook her head at him, raising her eyebrows.

“The neighbor told you what DuBois had told her, so she did at least talk to him.”

“Just to say hello, it was clear that they were not close friends.”

“That trailer court, you’d think it would be a small town, and they’d all be in each others business all the time.”

“Maybe it is just more of DuBois’ attitude of being different, I mean, a writer? He is a different kind of person than the typical sort who live there.”

“It’s not that way any more. People keep to themselves.”

He sat back. “We’re not getting a lot of traction with this. You didn’t get any arguments between DuBois and anyone?”

“Not a thing.”

“And the surveillance cameras were a bust?”

“Yup. Just periodic stills in that area and it doesn’t cover that part of DuBois’ street.”

“But I thought this would be a high crime area, what’s the point of having full color coverage in the neighborhoods that don’t have much crime and nothing in this area?”

“Because, oh innocent one, the fancy neighborhoods tax themselves to provide that coverage.”

“And then vote to cut the general tax levels so we can’t afford to provide good coverage in crime zones.”

“And since most businesses need to have coverage for insurance purposes ...”

“It’s only public areas that the public law enforcement agencies can’t protect. Beautiful.”

Philman’s terminal was beeping. It took him a minute to locate the reason why. “Just a second, are you getting this media flash?”

“Yes -- my goodness!”

Philman looked in sick fascination as the headline scrolled across his screen. It was obvious which keyword had caused the news to be routed to his computer. “Circle Terrorists claims responsibility for DuBois murder,” it read. An anonymous phone call to a station had the caller identifying himself as Circle and ‘giving details likely to be known only to the police.’

The story concluded with the station manager bragging that people who had a message to give society were more likely to pick his station because of its superior ratings.

“Mindy, would you...” Robert began.

“I’m on it,” she said forcefully and hung up. She’d contact the station, see if they could get a tape of the call, and she’d contact whatever company carried the phone call to the station and get them to trace it.

Philman sat in his office and was silent. Silent so long the ticking of the old fashioned mechanical clock he’d spent a lot of time and money to find registered with him. One thing he actually hadn’t done was scan the movements of Circle leaders. He’d considered the chance of their involvement to just be too remote to make that worthwhile. This call was likely a prank and he should wait for Mindy to prove it. But, he knew he knew that would never do now. Never do as police work and certainly not do politically.

He went to his computer. As a pre-certified suspicious group for its long-standing history of being regarded as suspicious, he could use pre-authorized warrants to instantly start surveillance and tracking on known local Circle leaders. A quick review didn’t turn up anything. By now, most of them had organized alibis established. They deliberately walked in front of surveillance cameras near their homes and sent e-mails with identify verification just so it would be difficult to place them near a crime. It wasn’t but a few minutes to establish that most of them were nowhere in the vicinity of Mr. DuBois’s trailer on the night in question. Of course, to some, this would just be proof of their cunning.

When Philman pulled the records he found that three local members of the Circle had been listed with a flag indicating they were considered to be of a higher risk of committing terrorist acts. Considered by who? Clicking on the flag just got him some chipper little help

popup. There was a stick figure pointing with a balloon above his head that said “We’re here to help you!” The text in the box said “Elevated Terrorism Risk: this flag is set if the person has been considered to have an elevated risk of committing a terrorist act.” Consulting the change log for their record Philman found an entry that this flag had been set seven months ago but the agent issuing the action was just listed as “brownkb.”

Philman chased that through the list of authorized users of this database only to discover that “brownkb” was the ID of Mr. K. B. Bipe, an applications developer in the IT department of Police HQ downtown. Philman sent him an email, but he suspected that all he’d get back is that this was work ordered by some other agency and the programmer either didn’t know who it was or couldn’t say.

Well, what about the reason why these people were so flagged or what they were thought to be of risk to do? In the change log entry Philman found a comment “Reason 011 / Level K”. He pulled up help again and searched for information about the meaning of these codes. He couldn’t find it. He sent an email to the support desk for this database, but even though he checked the boxes to indicate it was relevant to an ongoing major felony case, he didn’t expect to hear anything back.

He was about to get angry about this, when he decided to check into their movements. If he could rule them out, the terrorist rating wouldn’t matter. Not that killing DuBois could qualify as a terrorist act.

Like many other Circle leaders, they had their alibis ready to go. Two were out of town on speaking engagements, one offered verified email transmissions from his home during the time of the murder. The replies had come back so fast, Philman could only shake his head. If

someone asked him for an alibi for some night last week, he doubted he'd ever be able to come up with one.

He clicked over to the Circle website. He didn't think they were likely to claim a murder on their homepage, but he wondered if they'd refer to it at all. They did, "Another innocent victim's tragedy death falsely attributed to the Circle." Clicking on the link he found their standard explanation that they were opposed to all violence, denied any involvement with this murder specifically as well. About what he expected.

As the afternoon wore on and he continued to work the databases and logs, he realized his urgency was motivated to have something to tell Katarina, whom he expected to call with some demand at any moment. But she didn't call.

It was past six when he was ready to go home, and he sent her a voice mail.

"Katarina, this is Philman. We noticed the Circle claim, of course, we've investigated the call. We're not finished yet, it's only been a few hours, but we have been able to establish a probably origin point which does relate to a known Circle location, at least physically. Not so sure in terms of computer networks just yet. I'd prefer we not share that yet, we haven't gotten surveillance from that area processed, and we need to nail down the origin point. We have reviewed known Circle leaders and nothing suspicious is immediately apparent. We are also pursuing the original phone call altering us to the murder and I have hopes we can develop a significant lead from that." *What else? I don't want to hang up.*

"Oh, we're digging deeper into the activities of the deceased, and are getting a picture of his habits. But we do not have a prime suspect yet." He hung up and went home, nodding at the evening staff on his way out.