



TRUFAN PRESS

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One Trufan was a False Friend!

The Fractured Circle



Arnie Katz

Forward

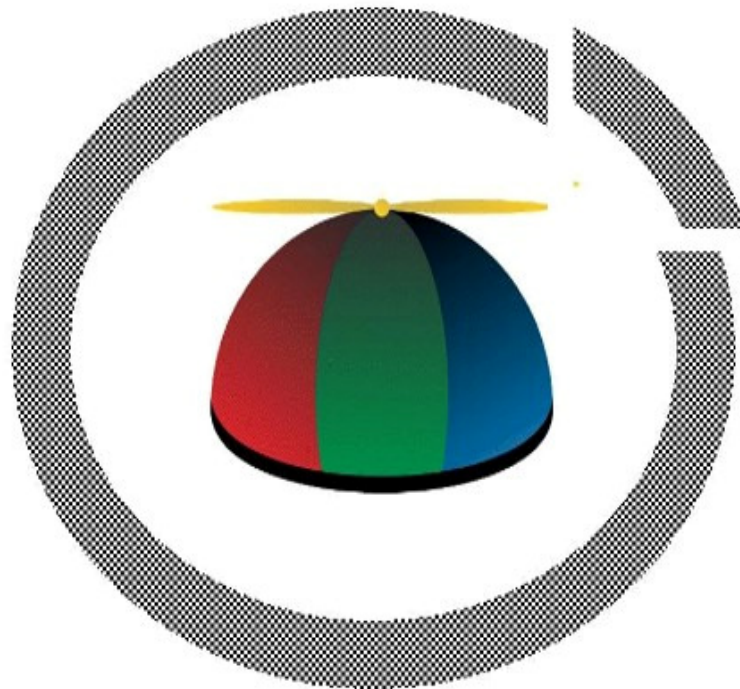
I've written several major, or at least lengthy, works for Fandom. This was both the most ambitious and most challenging.

Real events inspired me to write "The Fractured Circle," but it is not fictionalized truth or a *roman a clef* with thinly disguised fans as the characters.

Acknowledgement & Dedication

Joyce Katz, the High Priestess of Fandom, played a crucial role in readying "The Fractured Circle" for publication. She edited the manuscript, proofread and spellchecked the publication and provided a lot of encouragement and support.

The Fractured Circle



Arnie Katz

The Fractured Circle, a fan novel by Arnie Katz

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Editorial Address: crossfire4@cox.net

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Chapter One

Meet the Detective

It's pretty decent being a detective, except when it sucks.

It's that way too often for me, but I can stand it when I know it's coming.

Detectives don't see people at their best. Everyone is in trouble, everyone is stressed and everyone has something they want to hide. I try to stay alert when I'm working, so that the really foul stuff doesn't sneak up on me.

And then sometimes, the shit surprises you anyway and you just want to double over and puke out your last three meals.

This is about one of those bad ones. It caught me unprepared and I'll have it with me until they stuff my ashes into one of those decorative urns. It was that kind of case.

I want to bury it, forget the whole thing. I have to write about it, because it isn't going away. That means I have to deal with it and writing is the method I'm going to try.

That's the way I've done it for most of the 20 years since I got into Fandom. Some of the BNFs still think of me as "that newcomer" or something more negative, but two decades represents most of my adult life.

What got me about The Fractured Circle Case was that my investigation was within Fandom. I went to a couple of cons when I was in high school, but that never developed into anything, because I met Louise.

She's my ex-wife, now living happily in Mexico on alimony checks inscribed by me. With her out of the picture, I searched out local Fandom. I met Steve Corbin and Mark Carey and, for whatever reason, they brought me into the Insurgents and helped me get through a couple of years of being a neofan.

One of the reasons Fandom appealed to me, one of the things that made me into a fan, was that I needed something to take me away from my work. I never expected to have to take my work into my hobby.

I'm still not sure I should've done it.

This case is about Fandom, but this isn't a Goon

Blary story. I didn't get paid in porn, or in any coin you can spend, and there weren't many laughs. In fact, there weren't any.

You don't burst out laughing just because you've survived to the climax of a story without a happy ending. What you do, if you're me, is wipe the sweat off your forehead, plaster a smile on your face and pretend you're not still shaking inside. You pretend you're going about your business.

No one got killed, but something died for a lot of fans, me included. Fannish idealism took a knee-shaking kick in the 'nads. Some lives took critical hits and a fan suddenly became an ex-fan.

I've been doing detective work for 20 years; I started before I got serious about Fandom. There are always cases, even when the economy goes into the crapper. People keep right on having "little problems" and "situations" and they keep bringing them to me.

I hold down expenses, so it pays my bills and a little more in a good month. I get my clients mostly from the paper classified directories and online sites, so I don't even have the film noire gumshoe's shabby office. The clients always want me to come to them, anyway, so I keep the detective stuff in my den. The downside is that I'm also minus the leggy secretary.

That figures, because I'm not Phillip Marlowe, just Frank Blaine.

In Ross MacDonald's novels, Lew Archer gets clopped on the head or something three times a day, but I haven't had a confrontation that went further than some shouting and a few gestures since the 1990's. Even then, it was some coked-out nitwit in a bar and it had nothing to do with a case. I don't do those Lew Archer-Travis McGee kinds of cases. The money is a little less, but the level of danger is significantly lower.

That's another way this case threw me. It turned out to be my biggest, riskiest assignment – and I couldn't blame anyone for my involvement. After all, I volunteered.

I'm going to write up the case for you. I feel like I

need to do that so I can really let go of it, really move on to something else. I'd write it as a mainstream detective novel, but I don't think I can tell a Mundane reader everything they need to know about Fandom in order to understand the whole thing.

I don't have all that much, but I'm not going to lose what I have, plus a huge hunk of time, by getting on the receiving end of a defamation of character suit. So I wouldn't take the names, or even the personalities I'm planning to describe. All those changes won't bother me, but those numerous alterations will protect the innocent and the guilty alike.

I've added some stuff like plot twists and angles in the hope that it will make you as interested in reading this as I am in writing it. What I'm driving at is that it's cathartic from my point of view, but a faan fiction story from your vantage point.

One thing I'm not going to do is invent an imaginary city, complete with roads, buildings and landmarks. Everyone knows I live in Las Vegas, so the locale could turn out to be the only thing that *is* "drawn from real life."

I couldn't bear to use the name "Vegrants" in such a sordid connection, even though the story's southern Nevada locale makes it obvious that the informal invita-

tional Core Fandom fan club in *The Fractured Circle* is a fictionalized version of the Vegrants.

Instead, I'll call the group the "Vegas Insurgents. That lets me avoid invoking the cherished name "Vegrants" and may help *you* remember that this is fiction, not fact, and that the fans in the story are characters, not thinly disguised Real People. I'm admitting this as a show of faith in you, the readers. I hope you'll show equal faith in me and give me a chance to get rolling before you switch to your favorite assortment of porn videos.

It all adds up to one thing: Anyone who takes this as more than a faan fiction story is going to come up with some strange, wacky misinformation. My therapy is for me; the story is written to entertain you.

It's time to stop stalling and tell you what I sat down to tell you. I'm farting around, I guess, because it's pretty painful, even all dolled up like you're going to read it.

Besides, I don't have a lot more preliminaries. I can't recount any scenes of me sitting at a battered desk in my seedy office and swilling Mad Dog or brittle exchanges of repartee with my (non-existent) secretary. Let's get down to cases.

Chapter Two

A Tale of Two Letters

I'd gone back to the house after depositing the wrap-up check from the case I'd just finished. I was sitting in my den, trying to unwind after a week of long days doing surveillance.

Phillip Marlowe doesn't take marital cases. How very noble of him. That leaves a lot of potential clients with no reliable and discreet freelance snooper to get the evidence they need to back up their justified legal claims. That guarantees a lot more work for me.

I take those cases when they're offered, though snapping photos of straying husbands entering motel

rooms with their secretaries isn't my favorite pastime.

It's not supposed to be my pastime; it's my job.

I work the case until it's done and then I go home and try to forget about it. I don't drink or toke alone – my father was a solitary lush – but Fandom can be very diverting.

So I was peering into the screen of my desktop computer, checking my email, when the *Dr. Who* ringtone announced a phone call from Mark Carey. We're pretty good friends, but I usually don't like to talk much right after closing an assignment. Some people

are grouchy in the morning; I'm jangly immediately after a case. (I'm reasonably pleasant in the morning, however.)

I thought about just letting Mark go to voice mail. But sometimes, you have to make an exception for a friend, even if it's not very convenient. That's what Mark Carey told me when I first got into Fandom and that's what Steve Corbin has always preached at Insurgents meeting.

Mark had taken a few inconvenient calls from me, so I picked up this one on the third ring.

"Hello, Frank?" came the question when I brought the receiver to my ear.

"Yeah, Mark," I said, immediately recognizing his Deep South accent. "What's doing?" I was eager to get back to Lichtman's letter, but sometimes you have to give your friends time when it isn't exactly convenient.

"What did you think of the letter?" he asked.

"Why did you send me an email if you were going to call and ask about it?" I teased.

I wasn't playing dumb. I get about 400 emails a day, including almost a dozen that aren't either spam or InTheBar posts.

"Not from *me*, Fran; from Steve," he countered. Mark called me "Fran" or even "Francis Toner Blainey." His fascination with Laney and nicknames sometimes overcomes the fact that I'm "Franklin," not "Francis" and that my family name is "Blaine," not "Blainey." "I mean the one from Steve Corbin. It's a follow-up to the one Cele sent."

"Cele sent everyone a letter?" I interrupted.

"Two weeks ago, but I was asking about the one her husband Steve sent. His email is a follow up to hers.

"I didn't get it," I said.

"The second letter?" he asked. "Your name is in the header of Steve's email."

"No, I meant the first letter, the one from Cele," I replied. "I could've forgotten it," I added.

"I don't think so," Mark contradicted. "That's a letter you'd definitely remember."

"Why's that?" It seemed like a natural question, but I had a hunch that it wasn't making me sound any smarter.

"Believe me, you need to read Steve's letter. Look, go check your inbox and see if you have the letter from Steve," Mark said. "Please, call me when you've read it."

"This is really worrying you, isn't it?"

"Frank, this could devastate local Fandom." Mark took a heavy breath, as if his own words had brought the enormity of it home to him. "It could destroy the Insurgents," he said in a much lower voice.

"I'll find the letter and get back to you."

We meandered through the usual "good-byes." I returned to my email, closed the latest letter from Robert Lichtman and worked my way down the email queue.

Sure enough, I found an email from Steve Corbin, dated that day. As long as I was at it, I checked for one from Cele. I didn't find it. Unless I'd accidentally deleted Cele's email unread, which I doubted, I'd never received that one.

I opened Steve's email and read it. I went right back to the beginning and read it again. I wondered what Cele's original had been like; Steve's follow-up might as well have been written in flaming letters, because I knew it would be seared into my brain forever.

I sat for awhile, stunned. It was that kind of letter.

It was a follow-up to the one Mark had first mentioned on the phone.

Fortunately, Steve's letter recapped the one from Cele. That gave me the basic situation without some of the gut-wrenching details I later learned. The second letter certainly got across its points, though the very squeamish might start yelling, "TMI!" I hate that phrase. As a detective, I'd never encountered a situation in which I had "too much information." To me, it sounded like a desirable state, not one to avoid.

The letter told a terrible story of misplaced trust and a stark betrayal.

Steve's letter opened with a review of the events that had prompted his wife's email. Gale Corbin is, or was, an English teacher at Twin Lakes Senior High School.

Like most people of Jewish heritage, she'd taken off the first two days of Passover, which began at sundown on March 28th. She did not teach on that Tuesday and Wednesday.

The Corbins, Steve admitted, weren't too religious and hadn't even held a Seder, but both had stayed home out of cultural pride.

Briefly, I wondered how the Corbins had celebrated the occasion. Probably brought out their Holiday Pipe and enjoyed a 48-hour sex-drenched spree. A fairly riveting movie began running in my mental I-Max.

I returned to Steve's letter before the musical score turned to "wah-wah" guitar rock. The quicker you decide you don't want to see something and "walk out," the less time you've wasted.

According to Steve, Cele drove into the parking lot of Twin Lakes Senior High School on Thursday morning to resume work and parked her silver Corolla in her usual spot.

Cele had barely left her car when she vaguely no-

ticed three noisy male students walking towards her. There are always students around, even in the faculty parking area, so she didn't give them much attention.

As the students came closer, she heard them making a lot of noise, though she couldn't exactly tell what they were saying. That didn't cause an alert, either. High spirits are to be expected on April Fools Day.

She got a lot more worried when the trio suddenly began to fan out, effectively blocking her path and, she thought, possibly trying to surround her. Cele's worry mounted rapidly when they got close enough for her to decipher what they shouted. She'd assumed it was some sort of April Fools nonsense, but instead she heard assorted vulgarities about her physique and gender, laced with anti-Semitic phrases. "Christ-killer" and "kike" were the only ones Steve quoted, though he conceded that they knew their hate speech.

As they drew closer, she also realized that each of them towered over her 5'1" by about a foot. She also noticed for the first time that they all had gang tattoos and wore Nazi insignia. And they were skinheads.

The neo-Nazi skinheads surrounded her and, almost at once, their taunts became much more personal, revolving around what they intended to make Cele do for them. They said they knew she was a "Jewess," because she hadn't been in school the two previous days. They also knew that a "Jewess" was a whore who would do things no godly Christian woman would do. They called her "Jew-whore" and "Jew-slut" and told her they could give her what she needed after making do with teeny-weeny "Jew-pricks."

As they closed in around her, reaching out towards her with grasping hands, Cele began shrieking for help! One held her shoulders from behind, a second made a tentative grab for her chest and the third took her by the arm and started to yank her out of the broad lane of the parking lot to the more restricted, and less visible, space between the cars.

Suddenly, a blaring horn froze the three neo-Nazis and Cele in a tableau of assault and maybe worse. A black SUV rumbled down the aisle and stopped right next to them with a squeal of breaks. Four men erupted from the car while the fifth passenger, music appreciation and health teacher Marvella Hamilton, shouted encouragement and then added her piercing soprano scream to the growing alarm.

The teachers, led by Dieter Heinzl, former linebacker and coach of the freshman Football Team, ran into the circle that had trapped Cele and shouted for the students to back off. Like jackals deprived of their carcass, they lowered their hands and went into their version of an innocent act.

Cele's would-be persecutors kept up their phony

recitation of alibis and excuses until the teachers delivered them to Principal Weathers' office. Coach Henzel, with the others filling in details, told Principal Weathers what they'd seen. It made no difference to the three seniors, who kept churning out nonsense about how Cele had propositioned all three of them, that you couldn't trust "those people" not to lie and finally tried to pass off the whole incident as an April Fools Day stunt.

The gray-haired educator could hardly track the situation with everyone shouting at once. He believed the teachers over the menacing-looking students, but he also knew how charges of sexual impropriety could escalate into a major scandal. With some reluctance, he suspended Cele, pending an investigation.

Mr. Weathers sent Cele home.

The confrontation with the neo-Nazis had upset Cele, but she also was shaken by the violent thoughts that blazed through her head as the racist trio threatened her.

In her original email, Cele confided that, teetering on the edge of panic and confronting the specter of rape, she felt a searing urge to strike at her tormentors. She had learned Tactics in a Female Self-Defense class sponsored by her union local at Green Valley High School.

The course took place on four consecutive Wednesday evenings, a level of schooling hardly calculated to turn her into a killing machine. At the time, Cele wasn't exactly sold on the idea and made references to the "King of the Hill" episode in which Bobby takes a Female Self-Defense class and kicked boys in the testicles.

She'd never employed any of the supposedly fool-proof techniques. But, under the pressure of the moment, what she learned in that class suddenly seemed a lot more immediate and relevant. As memories flooded her mind, a part of her wished to turn the tables on her oppressors and make them pay in fear and pain for the way they'd treated her.

Cele's letter had described a few of the more drastic moves in lurid detail, because the images frightened her almost as badly as the three punks had. Recommended maneuvers included crippling blows to the genitals, face-slashing and eye-gouges and flat-out cutting and stabbing with the blade of the clasp knife Cele had carried in her purse since taking the course. The methods and techniques had come back to her as fresh as when she was actually doing the course, but she didn't act on any such impulses.

Looking back at the incident, she expressed grave self-doubts about these violent thoughts, so at odds with her normally calm demeanor and non-violent ap-

proach to life in general.

Steve quoted Cele's letter, where she said that the last time she had any degree of physical confrontation with anyone was at the age of eight, when she and another girl of the same age shoved each other during an argument over the possession of a jump rope during recess.

Steve's recap made for uncomfortable reading, but it turned out to be a night at Corflu compared to the rest of Steve's letter in which he revealed the shocking after-effects of her traumatic encounter.

Cele, though mortified by the accusations of sexual misconduct and drug-dealing, stayed home and let the school board people grind through their inquiry.

Public schools are supposed to teach kids about America's ideals of justice, fairness and equality. You have to wonder what kind of lesson it teaches kids that the Clark County School Board has things set up so that it doesn't have to consider justice, fairness or equality in dealing with teachers and other employees. Its deliberations secret, the accused has no chance to put up a defense and there is no appeal process.

The school's investigation took longer, due to the Easter holidays. Principal Weathers phoned Cele on Friday, April 9th, and asked her to come to his office the following Monday.

She went into the meeting dreading the worst, but Weathers greeted her warmly and gave her nothing but good news. The investigation had exonerated her. All three of her potential assailants had bulging files at school and good starts on impressive rap sheets with Vegas Metro, which knew them as small-time crooks, bullies and general troublemakers. Weathers awarded her a week of paid vacation in lieu of an actual apology and he even dangled the possibility of an official commendation for her coolness under extreme circumstances. Cele went home happy that her nightmare had ended.

A week later, on April 19th, when she returned to school to resume teaching her classes, the bomb dropped. Instead of business-as-usual or a "welcome" sign in the teachers' lounge, Cele found a terse note in her inbox that summoned her to the principal's office before home room.

When she got there, Dr. Weathers ordered her into the straight-back chair in front of his desk where so many students had felt the principal's displeasure.

Dr. Weathers told her that the school board had decided to terminate her contract, effective immediately, for "unspecified reasons." He indicated that the school would not oppose her collecting unemployment, but there would be no further work for her as a teacher in Clark County public schools and allied programs.

"That includes the one that hired you at the prison," Dr. Weathers advised her.

Though she was stunned, Cele did her best to get more information from Dr. Weathers. He ducked almost all of the questions with the practiced ease of a man with 20 years of verbal duels at PTA and school board meetings.

"But you were talking about a commendation!" Cele protested.

"Times change and we must respond to them," he intoned.

"That was less than two weeks ago!" she replied. "This is unfair!"

Dr. Weathers had looked flustered and mumbled something about the Dean of Faculty. Despite her complaints, he practically lifted her off the chair and forcefully conducted her to Phyllis Kerwood's office a few doors down the hall.

Dean Kerwood stonewalled her questions and informed her that the decision was final and couldn't be appealed. Cele kept posing questions, which got doubletalk answers.

Maybe the Dean just wanted to get rid of Cele, but she drew herself up in her chair and said that appeals were beside the point, anyway, because they had her own words. "We have come into possession of a most disturbing letter," she said.

When she recovered from *that* jolt, Cele had the presence of mind to ask to see the letter. Dean Kerwood refused again and again. In desperation, Cele begged her to at least tell her who had provided a copy of her email.

According to Steve, Cele's ceaseless questioning wore down the Dean's resolve. Just to get rid of her, Dean Kerwood finally told Cele the name on the letter, the person who furnished it to the school board. Steve didn't divulge that name in his email, because he and Cele had doubts about whether the person named was really the culpable party.

Steve listed the recipients of Cele's original email. Comparing that list against the recipients of Steve's latest email showed that he had expanded the emailing list by one fan: me.

After that, he vented a lot of hostility over what his wife had suffered. This "catastrophic betrayal," in Steve's words, had sent Cele to her bed, listless and tearful. Someone she had trusted with her innermost feelings had meddled in her life and ruined her career.

I printed out Steve's email and then wasted some time staring at it. I reread it and then went to the kitchen for a fresh MGD Light before I returned to the den and punched in Mark's number. It was going to be a long meeting.

Chapter Three

The Circle

“Some letter, huh?” Mark said as we prepared to get into the actual reason for the phone call.

“That’s for sure,” I agreed. “But why did you call me about this?”

“Steve listed you among the recipients of his email, but you weren’t on the list of people he said got Cele’s email.”

“That’s because I didn’t get the first letter,” I said, “so I wasn’t on the list.”

“Yes, but *I’m* on both lists,” he said. “I’m one of the nine suspects.”

“No one could seriously believe you’d do something like that,” I said. I couldn’t accept that the host of the Vegas Insurgents would behave so callously toward a friend and fellow Insurgent. It didn’t make sense.”

“Cele doesn’t know me that well yet,” Mark claimed.

“She’s married to your best friend,” I countered.

“She was mostly a confan before that.”

“What makes you think she would suspect you, of all people?” I didn’t like the way this conversation was going. I didn’t think Mark had anything to do with this mess, but he talked like someone with a guilty secret. I still didn’t believe he had done anything, but he sounded like one of those guys who lurch into a police station to confess to a crime they heard about on the news.

“It’s that stuff about not revealing the name that’s got me going,” Mark admitted. “They didn’t give out the name, because they didn’t think it was true. That’s the way they would be if it was my name.”

“Cele and Steve probably have the same kind of feelings about others on that list, too.”

“You may be right, Frank, but I just don’t know,” he said. “That’s why I called you in the first place.”

“What’s why you called me?”

“You aren’t part of the circle of suspects,” he said, “so you have no ax to grind.”

“Well, I don’t like to see my friends wrongly accused,” I said.

“Yeah, that’s true,” he said. “I called you, because I thought you’d want to help. And...”

“And what?”

“And you’re a detective,” he finally managed. “I was hoping that you’d check into things, see what you can find out.”

“Aren’t you confusing me with Goon Bleary?” I said. I’d always kept my job and Fandom separate; it still struck me as a damn good idea.

“I know that. This is serious,” he said. “This is going to ripple through the entire group. The Insurgents are going to want and need answers.”

“I’m afraid you’re right,” I reluctantly agreed. “This kind of thing could shake the Insurgents to its foundations. The Corbins withholding the name of the person who forwarded Cele’s email is going to sow suspicion and dissension.”

“I’ve already spent an unhealthy amount of time wondering which of them did this,” Mark conceded. “A lot of Fandom depends on trust and that’s especially true in a close-knit group like the Insurgents.”

“True,” I said. “This could put some friendships to the test.”

“Will you look into things?” Mark asked. “Would you be willing to get involved in the case?”

“Yes,” I said, because I realized that I already had. “I don’t see how I can stay out of it.”

“That’s great,” Mark said. “I’m really grateful.”

“You’ve done plenty for me over the years,” I acknowledged. There was no way I could do anything else, even if all my Insurgents buddies weren’t at ground zero of this situation.

“Thanks, Fran,” I won’t forget this.”

“I have a feeling I won’t, either.”

I didn’t rush into my investigation. I had learned, sometimes the hard way, that things go smoother with

some planning. So I got the letter and a notebook.

I started by setting up my case notebook. I don't use a casebook on a lot of my assignments, but this wasn't going to get resolved in a day.

I wrote down the each recipient's name on a separate sheet of paper. Well, to be accurate, I started to do it that way and then I decided to leave an extra, blank sheet between each member of the Circle.

I figured I'd need the extra room. Objectivity was out the window on this case, but in its place, I had deeper knowledge of each of the suspects, the Circle of Nine.

It made for a delicate balance. Knowing these people so well might make it harder to get information out of them, but it would be a lot easier to pinpoint each one's motivation and attitude. And I probably knew some stuff about each of them that might become relevant as I got into the investigation.

I knew I'd already leaped ahead of any nonfan detective. The police, if they got into this one, would start with Mark Carey, the person who showed the most interest in the case. If it turned out to be his name on the forwarded email, they'd drop all other lines of inquiry to fixate on Mark, probably the *least* likely suspect. To me, his strong allegiance to what he called the Trufan Ethos and his friendship with Steve took the crosshairs off him.

Mark wouldn't have violated Cele's confidentiality, even though she hadn't even thought to DNQ her email. Nonfans wouldn't know that Paul Gottlieb had broken Mark's DNQ just six months earlier with divisive effects on the Insurgents. The broken DNQ wasn't the root cause, but it hardened the factions. The Gottliebs and a few of their friends had left the Insurgents to form the Clark County Science Fiction Association, a small club that mostly watched movies and videos.

I snapped back to the here and now and carefully wrote my first name and phone number on the inside cover of the notebook. That had saved me a couple of times.

Finally ready, I wrote down what I knew about each member that I thought of as the Electronic Circle. When I'd written everything I could think of, which wasn't much at this stage, I reviewed what I had:

Mark Carey

Long-time fan and Insurgents' member
Currently host of the twice-monthly Insurgents meetings
Former co-editor of *Fanaspora* with Steve Corbin
Did Marsha Carey read it?

Dan Polander

Fan cartoonist
Active in Fandom since Tricon in 1966
Recent addition to the group

Paul Gottlieb

Former Insurgent, now host of CCSFA
Was this somehow connected?

Jennifer Gottlieb

No longer a member of the Insurgents
Popular in local Fandom, but mostly active socially

Donna Carlington

Former fringe southern confan
Insurgent for about one year
Promising and active Core Fandomite
Now lives with Sid Greenberg
Did Henry Greenberg see Cele's letter?

Naomi Palmer

Long-time Insurgent
Very active, but only on local level
More of a partier than a fan

Karen McClain

Fringe Insurgents member
Hasn't developed fannishly as expected

Gregg Messinger

Recent addition to the Insurgents
Artist and budding writer

Maria Handel

Who is she???

I called Mark Carey, again. He said he hadn't ever heard the name "Maria Handel" before it popped up among the recipients. If Mark and I both couldn't place the name, it was highly possible that Maria Handel wasn't a fan at all.

I told him I agreed and thanked him.

"Call as often as you need, Fran," he said. Mark went off on a fatalistic tangent about how he was a magnet for stuff like this and that it would probably turn out that someone had somehow used *his* name to forward that email.

"I don't believe you had anything to do with it," I said. "I also want to advise you, as your friend, not to keep saying that.

"It won't do you any good, no matter what happens. In fact, if it turns out that your name *is* on the let-

ter, you moaning about it in advance will turn you into a suspect.”

It took a little time to calm down Mark, but he eventually promised to take my advice.

After I hung up, I went back to reviewing the mem-

bers of the Circle. I flipped through the yellow, lined pages a couple of times before I decided I was just postponing the inevitable

It was time to talk to Cele Corbin.

Chapter Four

A Talk with Cele

Have you ever noticed that, in most mystery novels, the detective visits everyone in person? That’s because it’s much more dramatic that way. Personal interviews are the best way to get information, but not the only way. I expected the Corbins to be cooperative, so I decided to save time by phoning them. The face-to-face meetings would come soon enough.

“Hello, Steve,” I said when I heard his voice. “This is Frank Blaine.”

“I expected to hear from you,” Steve said. “You’re calling about the email I sent you today, right?”

“What else?” I said. “I was surprised you sent it to me, since Cele didn’t send me hers.”

“I thought the main active members of the Insurgents deserved to know what had happened.”

“You sent it to the whole membership?” I was aghast.

“No, no,” he responded. “Just to a few of the old guard, like you.” I wondered when I had been promoted to “old guard” from “promising neofan.”

“Well, I thought I would look into things, nose around some, see what I can find out.” I paused and then continued. “If that’s all right with you and Cele,” I added. Actually, I intended to snoop around whether he liked it or not, because of Mark, but there’s no sense creating difficulties where there aren’t any.

“I was hoping you’d do exactly that,” he admitted. “We don’t want this to be a police matter, a legal matter, if it’s something strictly among fans. Having you look into things seems like the best possible alternative to Cele and me.”

“What if I find something... uncomfortable?”

“Like what?” Steve asked. “What do you mean?”

“Well, investigations have a life of their own, Steve. The clues can take it in unexpected directions. Sometimes that can bring things to light,” I said, wondering what Steve was hiding.

“OK,” he said after a lengthy pause. “I know we can all trust your judgment and your discretion. Bottom line, what you find, you find”

“I appreciate the support, Steve.”

“Is there anything we can do now?” he asked.

“I need to talk to Cele.” Steve certainly knew that already, but I needed to put the idea in play.

“She’s lying down,” Steve said. “She hasn’t been herself since the firing and then finding out that the email she sent to friends caused it.”

“Maybe we can work it out for tomorrow,” I ventured.

“Give us a call in the morning,” Steve promised, “and I’ll see what I can do.”

I thought about something Steve had said and got

out the case notebook. Cele sent her email “to nine friends.” When I thought about it, I wasn’t sure that was true.

I decided to go through the Circle of Nine and, where I could, characterize each person’s attitude towards Cele.

Mark and Steve went back a long way in Fandom and had co-edited a fanzine. I couldn’t remember for sure, but I didn’t think there’d been any hassle when they folded it or noticed any heat between them in more recent times at Insurgents meetings. I didn’t know how close Mark and Cele were, but I provisionally wrote “friend.”

Dan Polander talked to Cele a lot at Insurgents meeting, but I didn’t know if the friendship extended further than that. Neither smoked, so they both hung out in the living room. I decided not to make a notation yet. I’d be speaking to him soon enough; I could put off judging his attitude toward Cele until then.

Paul and Jennifer Gottlieb were on the outs with the Insurgents. Or rather, Paul was. He tried to start a semi-prozine, *Erotic Fantasy*, which mixed fantasy fiction with hardcore sex photos. It wasn’t automatically a bad idea. Still, Paul spurned the Insurgents when the project launched.

Later, when he could’ve used the Insurgents’ editing and writing talent, the more experienced Insurgents turned a deaf ear. Paul took it hard when the first issue tanked and he went ballistic at even mild criticism of the magazine. He wrote a bunch of insults and quit the club.

The Corbins and the Careys hadn’t spoken since, so

I put, “Enemy” on Paul’s page. I left Jennifer’s without a notation. She wasn’t the type to get into something like this.

Donna Carlington also spent a lot of time in the living room. I didn’t think she was a special friend of Cele’s, but also not an enemy.

Naomi Palmer had a lot of opinions on a lot of subjects. Even I knew that she and Cele often argued about the educational system. I wrote, “Enemy.”

Karen McClain remained what she was when she first met the Insurgents, an enigma. She’d progressed steadily, rapidly, and then... she’d settled into the undemanding niche of a local club fan. She always argued with Cele. It was obvious that Karen didn’t like Cele. I wrote “unfriendly,” but that could be revised.

Gregg Messinger hadn’t had that much contact with Cele, since he’d only been an Insurgent for a few months. He seemed to like just about everyone and everyone reciprocated. I scribbled “friendly acquaintance.” If that surface impression was wrong, I’d know about it after I interviewed Cele and, maybe, Julia.

Maria Handel wasn’t anyone I knew, so I still had nothing but questions about her, questions that I intended to get answered.

The exercise had proven one thing, at least to me. Cele had really made a mistake, or rather a series of them. She shouldn’t have circulated such a revelatory email to people who didn’t like her.

Still, the school board was at fault for improperly judging her letter. She’d been punished by them for her thoughts, not actions.

And she’d expressed shame and regret about those thoughts!

Chapter Five

Her Lips Were Cele’d

I called the Corbins about 11 AM on Friday morning. After four rings, Cele picked up. “Who? Who?” she blurted. Her voice had a raspy, ragged edge that tipped her agitated state. I’d have to tread carefully in this conversational minefield.

“It’s me, Cele,” I said. “Frank Blaine.”

“Oh, hi!” she said with a little more animation in her voice. “Steve said you’d be calling.”

“Then you know why I’m calling,” I said.

“Y-yes,” she said.

"Is there a good time for me to come over and talk?" I asked.

"Well, well..." she said. "I-I..."

She sounded over-medicated. If this was an ordinary case, I'd have taken advantage of her obvious confusion and gotten in a few hard questions.

This was a different situation. Cele is a friend and she was in pain. I held back the questions I wanted to ask.

She was still dithering around, not quite saying anything, but I was hardly listening. Hearing her, someone usually so sharp and energetic, in such a state made me twice as determined to figure out what had happened.

"Maybe you'd like to have Steve there when we talk about this," I offered. She mumbled what I took to be assent, so I pressed. "I'll come over this evening, about 7:30, if that's all right," I said.

"Fine," she managed. "That would be fine."

"Good, I'll see you then." I hung up before she said anything to disturb the plan.

I spent the day looking through recent Las Vegas fanzines and visiting websites, including the archives of the two local fannish listservs. I checked the Walls of every Las Vegas fan on Facebook, almost three dozen of them, back a month to see if I could find anything useful.

I wish I could tell you it was time well spent, but I didn't get anything concrete. My search reminded me of a few minor things about the relationships that linked various members of the Circle, but no amazing revelation jumped out at me.

I showed up at the Corbin home as close as possible to the 7:30 time we'd set earlier. The Corbins liked things neat and orderly, including having things happen when they were scheduled to do so.

Steve greeted me at the door with effusive friendliness. I hoped this forced heartiness wouldn't evaporate when my questioning grew intrusive. He led me from the entrance hall to the living room where we sat on the couch.

"She has been through a lot, you know," he said.

"Yeah, I'll be gentle," I said, cutting to the bottom line. "I'm here to help."

"I'm sorry, Frank," he said. "I know that and I know I'm jittery. It's just that Cele is so down. She's like a different person."

He might've been going to say more, but Cele shuffled into the room. It wasn't like I didn't recognize her or anything like that, but she sure didn't look like the Cele Corbin I knew.

She didn't have on any make-up, a rarity for the 40-something Ms. Corbin, and her blonde hair wasn't combed. I was surprised she had any thing that looked that bad on her in her wardrobe.

The externals were out of whack, but there was something that disturbed me more. Her eyes didn't have the customary sparkle, her gaze wandered and defeat hung over her like a shroud.

"I know this has been terrible for you, Cele, and I hate to rake it up again," I began in my most soothing voice., "but it's the only way to get to the answers, to find out who did this."

"O-OK," she said hesitatingly.

"Let's go over a few of the facts, so I can put together a timeline," I said. I didn't really need her help to do that, but it's smart to start with easy questions and slide into the tougher ones after the subject gets comfortable.

So I asked her about the things I already knew and she got through that phase pretty well. I praised her behavior during the incident and I sympathized with both the trauma of the potential assault and the unfairness of the school board.

That was easy to do, because I believed what I was saying.

When I thought the time was right, I asked Steve to send me a copy of Cele's original email. I felt I already knew a lot about it and that I would probably learn it by heart before I came to the end of this case, but that didn't matter.

As I figured, the ever-obliging Steve rushed off to his computer to take care of the request. That left me alone with Cele for the harder questions, the ones I'd come there to ask.

"Now that you've had time to think about it," I said, "who do you think is most likely to have sent your email to the school board?" I posed once Steve passed out of earshot.

"I don't know," she said, a catch in her voice. "I thought they were *all* my friends."

"At least one of them wasn't," I told her. She still didn't understand that the members of the Circle of Nine, the recipients of her email, were definitely not all her friends. One had been so eager to plunge the knife that it had cost Cele her teaching career, at least in Nevada.

I still had one whopper to ask. Time pressure was transforming into a palpable force, because I sensed that Steve would be coming back to the living room all too soon.

"Who is Maria Handel?" I asked. I had a feeling this was the big one.

"She is a counselor and adviser," Cele said. There

was something practiced, automatic, about her delivery that put me on alert. Cele had been choked up throughout our whole conversation, but she rattled that line off faultlessly. She'd known I'd ask about Maria Handel and she'd rehearsed a reply calculated to deflect further inquiry. A little more thought would've told her that her answer would have exactly the opposite effect on me.

"Do you think she forwarded your letter?"

"Of course not!" Cele said quickly. "I certainly don't think so." That meant she *hoped* not, but she had some doubts.

That was good. She had to consider all the possibilities if we were going to arrive at the truth. The mere fact that "Maria Handel" was a pseudonym raised her high on the suspect list.

"I need to set up a meeting to talk with her, in person or on the phone," I said as casually as I could manage.

"She's a non-fan," Cele said, just as if that made a difference. In my mind, the less one of the Circle of Nine knew and understood about Fandom, the less likely that their behavior would conform to fannish standards.

I have to confess, also, that I'd nursed a secret hope that the traitor would turn out to be the nonfan; it was less upsetting than thinking about what kind of fan would act this way toward another fan and fellow Insurgents member.

I *wanted* to believe that Maria Handel could be the villain of the piece. That's the wrong way to work a case, but I'd already broken a bunch of my own rules and I'd only been on it for a day.

"Still, she got your email," I persisted, "and there's no reason to think that she is not a suspect, same as the other eight." She sat back on the couch, numbed surprise pasted on her face like a mask. She couldn't take that one straight, without flinching, which meant that there was something there that demanded more snooping.

I left that for later, though. I was trying to thaw out Cele again when Steve returned to the living room. He looked at her frozen expression and immediately said, "Frank, I think Cele is wrung out and needs to stop for now." She favored him with a grateful look, eager to escape the last topic I'd raised. When there's that much sensitivity, there's something hidden under that thin skin.

"I think you're right," I said. "I hope this hasn't been too stressful for you, Cele. Sometimes I have to ask tough questions to get at the truth."

"I-I understand," she said, hesitation distorting her voice.

"Again, thanks for talking to me, Cele. I'll do the best I can to help," I promised. I had to promise her something.

As I rose from the dark green couch, I added: "Who did the school official tell you forwarded the email?" Steve and Cele locked eyes in one of those quintessential Couple Moments that convinces the weak-minded that they are in telepathic communication with their significant other.

"Steve?" she asked weakly, drawing out his name in an wordlessly eloquent plea for him to take over the situation.

"I think we need to tell Frank," Steve counseled, "but we'll have to make sure he understands how we feel about it."

She nodded, swallowed hard, took a sip from her Pepsi and said nothing except the name, "Mark Carey."

"I don't think he did it," Steve added. "He understands the subculture of Fandom too damn well to go off like that. The idea of not even talking to Cele... Mark wouldn't go to the School District... He would understand..." He couldn't get out a complete sentence, but Steve got his feelings across in HD.

"He's *your* ex-co-editor," Cele said. It sounded uncomfortably like an unspoken accusation. Cele's fannish instincts are so good that her lack of fan experience always throws me.

"He would never do that," Steve insisted. They had temporarily forgotten my presence. I did nothing to remind them of it, either. I wanted to hear what they let slip in an unguarded situation with tension crackling like heat lightning in the room.

"C'mon, Cele, you know Mark," Steve begged. "He has always been a buddy to me and I think you'd have to agree that he treats you pretty well, too."

"He's always been nice to me, even if he disagreed with me about something," she conceded. Unreadable expressions flashed across her smooth, high-cheeked face. Maybe she was thinking about what her husband had just said and remembering Mark's kindnesses to her.

Whatever had spun through her mind in those moments, the enigmatic facial expressions finally resolved into one of Cele Corbin's radiant smiles.

"Some male fans can be very crude in their approach to women," Cele said. "Mark has never been anything but a good friend."

"I know he likes you a lot," Steve seconded, "but he wouldn't sneak around behind a friend's back. That's not his style."

"If Mark didn't forward the letter," I said, favoring them with one last Steely Gaze before I made my exit, "the question is: who did?"

Chapter Six

Comes the Revelation

I left them pondering that one.

By the time I got home, I'd become obsessed by the same question I'd tossed at the Corbins like a live grenade: If Mark didn't provide the letter, who did?"

It was too early to cross off any suspect, even one as unlikely as Mark Carey, but I decided to temporarily take his non-involvement as fact and see where that led me. He wouldn't be the first guilty person to bring in the detective to throw off suspicion, but I just couldn't take that seriously.

It struck me that the person who forwarded Cele's email under an email address that incorporated Mark's name must have been ashamed of the action, at least on some level, or was trying to keep from taking heat for ratting out a friend to her employer. If they'd really thought they were doing something noble and that they were protecting our city's youth, they'd have stood up proudly and taken the credit.

I'd have to see how many of the Nine had connections to the school district, but I didn't want to get carried away making up excuses and alibis for the miserable fakefan who betrayed Cele. Shame seemed much more likely.

Those were two fairly plausible reasons for why the culprit used a fictitious name. It didn't explain why they used *Mark's* name.

The only motivation that seemed likely to me is that they dragged in Mark's name to lead snoopers like me in other directions. It was a good back-up defense, for someone without scruples, if the school board gave Cele information about who'd sent them the document.

Mark was already part of the Circle of Nine and, therefore, a primary suspect. This little trick could've saddled Mark with a lengthy fight to prove his innocence.

There was one little problem with that theory: Even the fringiest Insurgent had to be aware of Mark Carey's stainless rep in Fandom. No one's perfect, but Mark could be relied upon to do the right thing, the trufanish thing, in almost every circumstance. Cele and Steve Corbin were highly skeptical about the authenticity of the screen name. It's likely that most fans who know Mark would feel the same way.

An appalling thought hit me. What if the person who forwarded Cele's email had *deliberately* picked Mark's name to sow dissension. They obviously created a bogus screen name on Yahoo to forward the email, proof of premeditation.

Was it an attack on the club as a whole as well as a missile aimed at Cele's career? The club had only recently shaken off the after-effects of the Gottlieb Walk-out. It might not take a lot more strife to make the group burst at the seams.

Damn few fans would buy Mark Carey as the person who did this, and to his best friend's wife at that. It didn't make sense and I'm sure I wouldn't be the only one who wouldn't buy that theory.

Could the traitorous fan have a deeper scheme? They could've chosen the Mark Carey identity precisely *because* no one would believe that Mark was the perpetrator. That would have ignited a hunt for the person who dragged Mark's name in the mud while stab-

bing Cele in the back. Allegations would fly, and some of the Insurgents would finger Paul Gottlieb as the guilty person, based on the existing poor relations between Paul and the Insurgents.

Viewed that way, Cele's nemesis had three lines of defense:

- * If the Clark County School District followed its usual procedures, they wouldn't have even told Cele about the email, much less given her the name of the forwarder.
- * If Cele somehow learned that the board had her confidential letter, it wouldn't tie the act to the culprit.
- * If Cele got the name of the forwarder from the school and Mark's defenders won their point, it would open the field for a nice, distracting witch hunt. Mark's defenders would face off against the remaining few who didn't understand the true situation about the real identity of the person who had shattered the bonds of trufannish mutual responsibility.

I knew I wasn't quite done. The logic chain needed one more link: Who did the wayward fan think would be suspected of besmirching Mark's name as well as what the anonymous fan had done to Cele?

I scanned the list of people who'd gotten the email from Cele. The obvious choice was Paul Gottlieb. He'd done some rash things when he blew up at the rest of the Insurgents and some fans could think this treachery was in his wheelhouse. They'd claim that Paul put Mark Carey's neck in the noose as a continuation of the earlier trouble.

If suspicion fell on Paul Gottlieb, Insurgents like the Sweeneys, the Callisons, Donna Carlington, Dan Polander and the Corbins would line up to counter-attack on behalf of their wrongfully implicated friend.

What a great distraction! If something like that broke loose, there'd be so much feuding that the Cele Corbin case could become just a footnote in Las Vegas fanhistory. Fans might call "case closed" on Cele's incident, because a Vegas fan war would drain so much of their energy and enthusiasm

Who would want to put Paul Gottlieb on the griddle? Paul *had* to be the Gottlieb on the griddle. Everyone likes Jennifer Gottlieb and no one extended their

bad feelings about Paul to include her. She was a loyal wife, supporting her husband, but not causing any trouble on her own hook.

The fact that framing Mark would put heat on Paul argued that he wouldn't have tried it. More likely, somebody would steal Mark's identity knowing that Paul would be suspected as the true culprit.

But who?

Hurt feelings and tender sensibilities had clouded Las Vegas Fandom since the rift. Unquestionably, many Insurgents harbored bad feelings toward Paul Gottlieb. It was hard to imagine any of the experienced Insurgents doing something that underhanded – and none of the less experienced Insurgents had enough heat about Gottlieb to go to all that trouble.

That was definitely *not* the Trufannish Way.

If Mark Carey, Steve Corbin, Dan Polander or one of the savvier Insurgents wanted to retaliate against Paul Gottlieb, this isn't how they'd do it. They wouldn't attack from hiding under an assumed name. No, they would confront the object of their wrath out in the open – and the target would know the origin of the barrage.

So the perpetrator could well be someone who disliked both Cele and Paul. Come to that, they probably weren't too fond of Mark Carey, either, or they might've picked a different false front.

Use of the false name also implied that the person, whatever they may have told themselves, knew there was something wrong with turning in that email to the school board, where it would do Cele the most possible damage.

In short, I needed to find someone with motive and, possibly, lack of fannish scruples. Once you threw out the belief that no fan would act so badly, several Insurgents might fit that description, but not all of them received the letter that ended up getting Cele canned.

I'd have to find out whether the original email got any extra circulation. Cele hadn't slapped a DNQ on it, so the email could've leaked to some loved ones and even close friends.

I still wasn't ready to clear any suspects, but some seemed like long shots. Mark Carey, Dan Polander, the Gottliebs and Naomi Palmer knew enough about fans and Fandom not to do something like this. Donna Carlington might be a little new to the subculture, but she would've forwarded the letter with her own name if she did something this extreme. Gregg Messenger might, or might not, fall into that category, depending on his recent dealings with Cele.

Naomi Palmer and Karen McClain satisfied the conditions and both received Cele's unwise confession. I didn't know anything about Maria Handel, though she didn't appear to be Cele's enemy. I'd have to find out more about all three.

Chapter Seven

A Chat with Polander

If the more experienced Insurgents were the least likely suspects, they were also potentially the best witnesses. I decided to test that theory by talking to Dan Polander. He looked like the Least Likely Suspect, but unlike a lot of mystery novels, it was because he *was* the least likely suspect. I didn't know how helpful he could be, or would be, but at least I was reasonably sure I wouldn't be tipping my hand to the actual traitor.

I thought about doing it on the phone or waiting for the Insurgents meeting, but I rejected both alternatives. Dan Polander was a shy and laconic individual; I wanted to see his reaction, so the telephone was no good and privacy would give me a better shot with the soft-spoken Polander.

I called his cell phone to set up a meeting. Dan was reticent, as I'd expected. I didn't think he was hiding anything, but Dan doesn't often give opinions about what he observes at Insurgents meetings.

He finally agreed to stop by my house after doing some Saturday banking. I told Dan I'd see him in a couple of hours.

I was reading the latest *Banana Wings* when Dan Polander knocked lightly on the front door. I probably wouldn't have heard it if I hadn't been listening. Listening for it on a chair right near the door, I mean.

I rushed to the door, flung it open and ushered Dan Polander down the short hallway and into the den. He didn't want a soda or a beer, so I got a Diet Dr. Pepper for me and took my usual chair.

"You know about Cele's situation, because you got her email and the follow-up from Steve, right?" I said

to Dan after he'd relaxed about as much as he ever did in situations like this.

"You know I'm not nosy," he said with careful slowness.

"Everyone knows that you know how to mind your own business," I assured Dan.

"I know about the incident from Cele's email and about the firing due to someone breaking Cele's confidence," he said. "What a sad thing for Cele and Steve." If I'd had any doubts about Dan Polander, his facial expression would have silenced them.

"Definitely," I agreed. "She's not going to teach in Clark County again. She might not be able to teach in the entire state of Nevada or even the whole country."

"I hope she'll be all right," Dan said.

"That's why I needed to talk to you," I said, seizing the opportunity. "Cele and Steve asked me to look into... things."

"I-I don't want to..."

"I understand, Dan. I wouldn't be doing this if it wasn't strictly necessary. All the suspicion hurts everyone, hurts the Insurgents." It was hard-hearted to cut him off like that, and I regretted it, but it was necessary to avoid a self-analytical soliloquy that could've untracked the whole interview. I knew his doubts, but I needed Dan's cooperation.

"I'm doing this to help Cele and get it settled down before it eats through the club like a cancer," I elaborated. "I wouldn't ask this of you, but we need your help."

His sigh filled the den as Dan struggled to come to terms with what was required, even if it went against

his grain. "I don't know if there's anything I can say that would be helpful, but I'll do what I can."

"All you can do is what you can do, Dan," I soothed. "I know everyone will appreciate that you really extended yourself to help, but we can keep this confidential if that works better for you."

His expression softened a little as he seized upon the safe haven of anonymity. A look of resolve replaced it as he said, "No, Frank, that wouldn't be right."

"What wouldn't be right?"

"If I give information in secret, that would be like what someone did to Cele. I couldn't do that."

"I know you couldn't do things that way, Dan, but I had to let you know that it was an alternative," I replied. "That's a big reason I've come to you for help."

"I hope this isn't going to spill into the courts," he said. "I'll tell the truth anywhere, if it comes to it, but I would prefer the Insurgents settle things for themselves."

"This isn't a legal thing, Dan. In fact, I'm doing this to try to keep it among fans as much as possible."

"That's good," he said. "I don't like to see fannish matters go into the mainstream courts. Fans should be able to work out this kind of thing."

"That's the way it should be and it's my aim to keep it that way," I said, a little startled by my own corny idealism.

It was time to get down to the case. "You sometimes hang out in the living room at Insurgents, so I was wondering if you saw anyone being unusually friendly to Cele or unusually unfriendly."

"She's got a lot of friends," he said, "Cele's a delightful woman. I enjoy talking with her quite a bit myself."

"Yes, but have you noticed anyone who has been unusually buddy-buddy or suddenly gone cold to her?"

"It's hard to say, Frank," Dan replied. "The women have had a lot going on among them since they started their secret apa."

"Secret apa?" I'd never heard of it until that instant. The denizens of the Careys' living room on Insurgents night sometimes chattered like magpies, but evidently, they were pretty good at keeping secrets, too.

"Yes, they started it about six months ago, I think," Dan said. "They probably don't know that I know about it and, of course, I haven't told anyone. Until now." He frowned.

"Look, Dan, I know you wouldn't talk about it ordinarily," I assured him. "You're doing it because some things are more important than the letter of an abstract code. I believe in the DNQ, but when there's so much more at stake..." I trailed off.

"I think I understand what you mean," he said and

sighed again. "The women in the Insurgents are all getting very chummy these days," he observed.

"You think it's the effect of the secret apa?" I asked.

"Yes, that may be the reason," he answered.

"Almost all the women in the Insurgents belong to it – Donna, Marsha, Cele, Naomi. I think Jennifer might be a member, too, despite the problems between Paul and the Insurgents."

"You used the word 'almost'," I said. "Who isn't a member?"

"All of us male fans, of course," he began. I nodded, hoping to avoid a fanhistorical digression about women's apas and fanzines. "Karen McClain isn't a member, I'm pretty sure."

"Do you know why?" I asked.

"Just not interested, I suppose," he said. "You know how she is." Karen was an okay person and a colorful addition to the group, but almost never joined in any of the creative activities.

"Anyone else?" I prompted.

"There's... Carolyn Profetti," he said, naming the Insurgents' newest member. She'd spent a couple of years on the outskirts of BArea Fandom, mostly around people whose primary "fanac" is wearing hall costumes 24/7.

She'd moved to Las Vegas, gotten a job as a Bingo caller at the Luxor and gravitated toward the Insurgents after first visiting the city's two formal clubs. Carolyn was easing into the Core Fandom subculture and seemed to be adjusting to it reasonably well.

Carolyn still had a long way to go in her fannish education. The club's women, less swayed by her hot looks, might take longer to invite her to join something like this secret apa, until they were sure of her.

"I don't know if this means anything," Dan said. "It probably doesn't."

"Tel me, Dan," I begged. "Maybe it's nothing, but you never know what little fact can fit another piece into the puzzle."

"You asked about friends and enemies," Dan began again. "It looked like Carolyn was really getting close to Cele and maybe others in the group -- and then everything cooled down in a hurry. One meeting Carolyn seemed to be getting very friendly with Cele and the others; the next meeting, she retreated behind her defenses. That's how it looked to me, anyway"

"Did Carolyn fight with Cele?" I asked.

"Oh, no, they didn't insult each other, not that I ever heard." He emphasized the last phrase. "Maybe they argued, but not at the Insurgents meeting. It was more a feeling that they weren't as close as they had been during the fall."

If Carolyn and Cele were on the outs with each other, then the redheaded newcomer would be a major suspect. Well, except for one small detail: Carolyn wasn't one of the recipients of Cele's email. I'd have to nail that down.

"Was there anything else?" Dan asked, jerking

me out of my mental musings.

"I don't think so, Dan," I said, "but if you think of anything, even if it seems trivial, please give me a call."

He said he would and I told him I'd see him at next Saturday's Insurgents meeting.

Chapter Eight

A Messenger Message

When I got home, I checked my voice mail and found I had one from Gregg Messenger. He was fairly new to the Insurgents, but he certainly seemed like a potentially outstanding fan, perhaps even a "Best New Fan" winner in the tradition of Teresa Cochran and Jacq Monahan.

He picked it up on the second ring with a cherry, "Hello, Frank!" he boomed. "How is Fandom's answer to Sherlock Holmes?" I think he would've pissed himself if I'd asked him to become my Dr. Watson.

Just fine, Gregg," I said. "I got your voice mail."

"I figured you'd want to talk with me," he replied, "since I am one of the fans who got the letter from Cele."

He was right.

I did want to talk to him. Still, a detective learns to tread warily when confronted by an overly helpful witness. My experience in over 5,000 cases is that anyone who volunteers too much often has a hidden agenda. I didn't know if that was true for Gregg – or if he was just excited to be included in the big doings.

Most likely, this was just more of the same enthusiastic spirit that made the neofan a good bet to volunteer for any task, no matter how much drudgery was involved. I'd have to figure out where he stood in all this. He was probably the proverbial innocent bystander, but I wasn't ready to put my faith in that kind of assumption.

"Yes, you were definitely on my list," I assured him. "Where'd you get all this information?"

"From Steve, when I called Cele to tell her that I

didn't know whose name the school board told her, but that I didn't show her email to anyone."

"Did you contact Cele after you got her original letter about the incident?" I queried.

"Yes, the same day," Gregg replied. "Her email was so full of regret and doubt that I just had to call."

"What happened?"

"She was out of her head, so I didn't stay on the phone for long," he admitted. "Cele said she'd spent a lot of time on the phone, since almost everyone who got the letter did exactly what I did and called to give her some support." There was that sneaky word "almost," again. I'd have to check on contact between the Circle of Nine and the Corbins.

"And then, when you got Steve's follow-up, you called the Corbins?"

"Right."

"And you talked to Steve, not Cele after his email?" I summarized.

"Yes, she went to their bedroom and crawled under the cover. Steve told me that I wasn't the only person who'd responded to his email." I had some questions to ask Steve, but that would have to wait until I'd learned everything that Gregg Messenger had to tell me.

"Did you notice anyone at the Insurgent meetings around the time of Cele's incident who acted strangely or got heated up about the whole thing? Someone who maybe wanted to debate Cele's conduct, how she handled the confrontation with the three teenage thugs?"

"You know how it is in the living room," Gregg said. "They argue and argue about nothing much."

"I guess they enjoy it," I observed.

"Sometimes it gets pretty heated, though," he said. "It looked to me like Cele and Karen have been getting into arguments at every meeting."

"Do they get personal?"

"No, not exactly," he replied, "but you could tell that they were both really unhappy about their differences of opinion. Karen McClain can get kinda passionate about some things, you know."

"Did they ever stop talking to each other?" I asked.

"The living room Insurgents *never stop* talking," Gregg noted. "Sometimes Karen would get so far up on her high horse – that's what Cele called it – that Cele would just stop the conversation and go get a drink in the dining room," he recalled. "It was nothing permanent, just some friction."

"It's something to think about," I told him. "If you come up with anything else, call me."

"I will," Gregg said. He paused and I had a pretty good idea about what he was going to say next. "Is there anything I can do? I mean, is there any way I can help? Cele has been very good to me since I joined the club and if I can help her, I want to."

Sure enough, he *did* want to play Dr. Watson. On the other hand, I'd anticipated his offer and was prepared. "There is one thing you could do," I said, "if you want to help."

"Sure, what can I do?"

"I assume that Steve told you who supposedly forwarded the letter to the school people."

"Mark Carey."

"That's what the Dean told Cele after the principal fired her."

"I don't believe it," Gregg interjected. "It has to be someone with a phony email address. Mark wouldn't treat Cele Corbin that way. There's a bond among fans that..."

"That's what I think, too." It was my turn to interrupt him. We really didn't have time for windy digressions about the Trufannish Creed. "Mark's actual Internet account is with Cox, not Yahoo. The Dean of Faculty told Cele it was 'MarkCarey@Yahoo.com' on the email."

"I gotcha," Gregg said, eager to impress me with his detecting skills. "You're thinking that, if it was Mark, why would he spend the time to transfer the letter to a different account before sending it to the school board – and then used a second account that still had his real name?"

Give him credit. Messinger was thinking the right way. So that's what I did: give him credit. "That's exactly right, Gregg," I said. "If he was going to move the email off his account, it doesn't make sense to use another account with such an identifiable name."

"So what do you need me to do?" he persisted.

"The Yahoo account may be the key," I said. "We need to find out who has that account and what it has been used for, if anything, besides this," I explained. "If this screen name was just for this, then it's something between fans and maybe we can keep it all from blowing up into a big-deal legal case."

"That makes sense, I guess," Gregg said. "I'm not a computer geek, but I'll see what I can find."

"Great," I said. "Call me when you've had a chance to investigate."

Chapter Nine

A Suspect with Benefits

After I disconnected and left Gregg Messinger to his assigned task, I punched Donna Carlington's number into my Blackberry. Her musical southern drawl

was soon purring in my ear.

"Come right on over, Sugah" she said.

So I did.

Donna Carlington met me at the door in a purple silk robe embroidered with multi-colored dragons. It covered, but did not hide.

That wasn't a surprise. I had seen her in that very same robe and less when I visited her more regularly, before she'd moved in with Harry Greenberg two months ago. I'd stayed away, because a new couple needed space. That's what I told friends. \

I didn't mention that it hurt to see Donna with someone else, even if I wasn't ready to make a commitment and settle down.

She led me to the couch. When I sat down, she slid onto my lap. That didn't surprise me either, though maybe it should've.

Donna and I had enjoyed a brief, but passionate affair when she first came to Las Vegas. That changed into more of a "friends with benefits" arrangement after the initial heat. We had both realized that neither of us thought we'd make a viable couple and, neither of us was longing for permanence. I kept weird hours, she wanted a man who'd be there all the time; I was a recluse and she liked to go out. These things didn't affect our friendship or our sex, but would've sunk us as a couple.

Naturally, she and I saw others, in and out of Fandom. Then she started living with Henry Greenberg. That didn't stop the friendship, but it killed the "Benefits."

Still, old habits die hard, especially a pleasurable one like Donna Carlington. It was obvious, as we began to snog, that Donna had a habit she didn't want to break, either.

"Nice robe," I said as I undid the sash. She shifted and the robe parted as my hand caressed her.

"The bedroom's nice, too, Sugah," she said.

After we'd evaluated that claim for an hour or so, we returned to the living room couch. Donna was still flirty, but she had put on jeans and an Insurgents tee-shirt. I could still feel the heat of her unconfined silicone-enhanced breasts through the thin fabric when she sat back down on my lap.

"I didn't forward the letter," Donna said without waiting for me to bring up the subject that had, ostensibly, brought me to her door. "I think Cele was too tough on herself in that letter. Anyone would've had violent thoughts. I told her so when I called her after getting it."

"I didn't think you'd do something like that, Donna." Silently, I thanked her for letting me off the hook of asking her. She'd declared her innocence and I believed her, "You'd have talked to her first."

"Cele is a friend," Donna said. "I would nevah do

anything like that, especially without talking to her about it first."

"You sometimes hang out in the living room at Insurgents meetings," I said. "Have you seen anything that might give us a clue about who did this to Cele?"

"Like what, Sugah?" she asked. She put a lot of her chest into the question and I started not to care about the answer. I didn't want to push her away right after sex, but I knew I'd better concentrate on the case. To strengthen my resolve, I took my hand out from under her tee-shirt.

"Honestly, I'm not sure," I confessed. "Anything you think might connect to Cele?"

"Some times, and I don't mean to speak against any one, Cele and Karen fight like she-cats," Donna said "You probably already knew that, didn't you, Mistah Detective?" She poked me in the chest, but not hard enough to risk chipping a nail.

"It has been mentioned, but your corroboration helps a lot" I observed. "Was there a particular flare-up lately?"

"Nothing unusual," she allowed, "but 'usual' for them is fussing about the Las Vegas school system and the current state of public education. Those two girls almost neveh agree on anything".

"What about Carolyn Profetti?"

"It's funny you should ask," she replied. "I thought Carolyn and Cele wee getting pretty cordial with each other and then it changed all of a sudden. They stopped sitting side by side and such."

"Did Henry read Cele's letter, too?"

"Yes, I showed it to him. I did the same when I got Steve's email about those school people taking away Cele's job."

"What did Henry think of it?"

"I don't know that he had any strong opinion on the subject," she answered. "He thought Cele had made a mistake by sending her letter to all those fans."

"All fans are definitely not brothers," I said. I lightly pressed on the tiny hill her nipple made in her tee-shirt. "Or sisters, either."

"Fans are like a big family," she observed, "but I definitely do not trust all of my relatives."

"It doesn't sound like Henry is much of a suspect," I assured her. "Not that I ever thought it was Henry. I'm just trying to fill in the blank spaces in the story."

"I sure hope you find out what happened, Sugah," Donna said. "I purely hate what she's going through with all of this."

"Everyone does," I seconded, "except maybe the

person who forwarded that email under Mark Carey's name."

"Then you don't believe Mark Carey did that awful thing, either?" she said. "It's just not like him. It's not in his character. It would violate his fannish principles."

"That's how it looks to me, too. Mark could be a whistle-blower, but he would have done everything out in the open and he would've first tried to do what he felt needed to be done within Fandom. He's not a sneak."

"Do you think the person who forwarded the email meant to do so much harm?" she asked. "It's so extreme, if y'all know what I mean."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you think whomever it was thought it would cost Cele two jobs and all of that humiliation?" she asked.

"That's a point, Donna," I conceded. "Maybe someone got carried away, maybe after an Insurgents meeting."

"They *do* have some mighty emphatic discussions in the living room," Donna said.

"Maybe the person who forwarded the email thought it would get Cele nothing more than a reprimand or some counseling,"

"That's certainly what I would have expected," she said. "Cele's letter gave hers the worst of it and then some. She was all broken into pieces about some violent thoughts. My daddy said they can't hang you for what you're only thinking."

"Your daddy was right," I said. "The school board or its representative obviously didn't read the email too carefully if they fired her because of it."

"So what if someone who did read that email carefully didn't think it would do so much damage," Donna proposed. "What if they wanted to get Cele in a little trouble, or maybe force her to get some counseling or something like that?"

"There's one thing you need to keep in mind, though," I reminded her. "The person who gave the email to the school board posed as Mark Carey. If they thought this was altruistic, 'for the children', and all the rest of it, wouldn't they have used their own name?"

"Or they just didn't want to get involved," she suggested.

"I wish it was that simple, Donna, but I don't think so," I said. "They didn't use any old phony name. Putting Mark's name on the email was a calculated move."

"I don't see why they would go to all that bother," Donna wondered. "Why use Mark's name? No one would believe he did it."

"The way I've got it figured, the person who for-

warded the email set up lines of defense. They expected the school board to use the letter as a reason to discipline Cele, but not tell her about it at all. The board doesn't have to give reasons for their decisions and they aren't eligible for any kind of review."

"If that woman told Cele who forwarded the letter, as they actually did, they'd have given her Mark Carey's name."

"And that would be a dead end," Donna said, "because Steve and Cele never would believe that Mark did it."

"Or they might get sidetracked trying to figure out who posed as Mark," I said. "And that might've thrown suspicion on Paul Gottlieb."

"I do not believe Paul or Jennifer had a single thing to do with this," Donna said.

"Neither do I. Paul had his troubles with the Insurgents, but this isn't his kind of thing at all," I replied. "But it could've kicked off a lot of squabbling, couldn't it?"

"That's for sure, Sugah," she said.

"Do you know if any other Insurgents work for the school board?"

"Karen works for the school, on computers and things," Donna said. "And Jennifer Gottlieb is a dietitian for them."

"Jennifer is even less likely than Paul as a suspect," I said. "She isn't the kind of person who'd get involved and, if she did, not like this."

"I positively agree, Sugah," she said, "but I'm not so sure about Karen McClain."

"I'll keep that in mind," I promised.

"Is there anything else, Sugah?" Donna asked as she began to squirm on my lap. She wound her arms around my neck.

"I appreciate your help, Donna, but I think that's all the questions I have for now." I reached down and tapped the ornate buckle centered in the waistband of her jeans.

"Thank you, sir," she said, as she moved closer.

"Nice buckle," I observed as I undid it.

Chapter Ten

The Clues Cometh

I left Donna about an hour later. I had a lot to think about concerning her. What to do about our relationship hung heavy on my mind, but I couldn't do anything about it. I had to give my total attention to the case, though my thoughts wanted to drift in Donna's direction. Or maybe I just wasn't ready to make a hard decision.

Firmly putting aside the pleasant memories of the afternoon, I buckled down to adding notes to the casebook. That took about a half-hour, because I'd collected a lot of information. Some of it, I told myself, might even be useful.

It made me feel a lot better. At least I was getting solid information, even though there was no proof of anyone's guilt in sight.

Some of those tricky pieces were starting to link up.

I'd more or less eliminated the Gottliebs, Mark Carey, Dan Polander and Donna Carlinton from the list of likely suspects, even though they were in the Circle of Nine. New evidence could change that, but experience dictated that I concentrate on those remaining: Naomi Palmer, Karen McClain and the mysterious Maria Handel.

I now knew for certain that at least one of the original recipients of Cele's email had shown it to someone else. That meant I'd have to identify secondary recipients as I interviewed each of the primary ones.

I had a question for Steve and Cele, but as I reached for it to make the call, the phone rang.

"Neofan detective Messinger reporting," he said. When I didn't react, he went on in a more serious vein.

"I wasn't completely successful, Frank, but I did unearth some evidence," he said, his voice excited, but precise and serious. Gregg had instantly caught on that I had intentionally ignored his attempt at lightness and immediately switched gears.

That was just as well, because I wasn't in the mood for Fabulous Fannish Chitterchatter. Messinger, despite his detective fantasies, had a lot going for him. We'd have to include him more in the fanzine and website fanac, once this case was finished.

"What did you find out?" I prompted.

"First, I called Mark Carey and asked for his Internet passwords. He was reluctant at first, but I assured him I would never use these passwords for anything but the investigation," he said.

I didn't need a videophone to see his smile; that show of faith clearly meant a lot to him, being virtually a neofan.

Mark had probably waited just long enough for Gregg to use the codes. Then, despite what he'd said, Mark probably changed it.

I didn't see any reason to tell Gregg. He'd never use the passwords on Mark's actual Cox.net or other online account, so he'd never know and he could keep that good feeling.

Even in Fandom, even in Core Fandom and, yes, even in the Las Vegas Insurgents, there's a common-sense limit to trust. It's fine, even proper, to expect Core Fandomites to live up to the subculture's standards. But it's good to take heed of those who actually don't act like trufans.

It's also a good idea to recognize that fans, as mar-

velous as they may be, are fallible humans. They can make mistakes, succumb to temptation or simply go bad like a couple of sticky-fingered TAFF winners of the past.

"I tried to use each of his passwords to break into the account, but none of them worked. I tried a few simple variations, but those didn't give me access, either," Gregg continued. "When the passwords didn't work, Yahoo fed me security questions.

"The questions themselves didn't make sense, Frank."

"In what way?"

"One asked for Mark's eldest daughter's middle name," Gregg said. "He doesn't *have* a daughter!"

"That's right," I said. "It's not proof of innocence, but it makes it even less likely that Mark forwarded that letter,"

"I ran up the profile, but it was mostly blank," Gregg added. "I did find out that the account has been active for over two years!"

"How do you know?"

"The account had two security questions and included the date those questions were added. The earlier of the two dated from nearly two years before Cele sent her email about the incident!"

"What about a start date for the account?"

"I couldn't get an exact date for the account without the password, but it looks like it was created well before Cele's letter."

"I'm not sure if that's good news or bad news," I admitted. "It means that the account wasn't created for the specific purpose of dragging Mark's name through the slime."

"And that's good news, because...?" Gregg drew out the last word, prompting me for an answer.

"Because it suggests that the traitor fan was probably less premeditated in the use of Mark's name," I elaborated. "Of course, it sets up a new mystery."

"What's that?"

"Well, consider this: why was that bogus account created two years ago?" I challenged.

"I see your point," he said meekly "But what's the bad news?"

"The bad news is that the account has kicked around for at least two years," I said. "Maybe it was used for something worse than ratting out a fan-friend." I had a sudden vision of Mark Carey's name on a couple of million scam emails.

"Or what if the bastard used the account to do something in Fandom?" Gregg proposed. "An email here and there could stir up a world of trouble."

The idea of Mark's name as a front for scammers had evidently mesmerized me, because I hadn't even

considered the possibility of the culprit using the Carey account for other evil purposes in Fandom.

"Mark's got some work ahead of him."

"How so?"

"He's going to have to nose around Fandom to find out if anyone has had contact with that account," I said. "And now we've got another job, too, I guess," Gregg relied.

"You mean we have to find out if the account was put to any non-fannish uses," Gregg observed.

"The way the account was used will have a big effect on how we wind up the case."

"Whether the account interacted only with the school board, did other things but stayed within Fandom or is the hub of a worldwide criminal conspiracy?" Gregg laughed a little. The last two alternatives made me sick to my stomach and incapable of laughing even if it was probably funny.

"So if what the fakefan did involves only Cele and Mark, it would be their call about making it a court case," I said. "If the identity theft made it possible to do harm to others, maybe even on a large scale, it would have to go to the police."

"I hope not," Gregg responded, "because I'd hate to see someone go to jail over this."

"If it doesn't go beyond Fandom, except for forwarding the letter to the school," I promised, "I'll do what I can to keep it within Fandom."

"What if it's neither extreme," Gregg said. "What if it wasn't used outside Fandom, but it *was* used more extensively in Fandom than for just forwarding Cele's email?"

"We'd have to judge after we know the full circumstances." I paused, weighing factors. "If the bogus account defrauded fans of money and possessions, then we'd have to talk to the other victims. Their decisions would depend on what they lost and the chances of recovery."

"And if the account didn't actually bilk any fans?"

"Then it would most probably be a matter that should be straightened out within Fandom," I said. "That's the way I think fannish matters should be settled, whenever possible."

"I think that's better, too," he said. "A court isn't likely to understand our little subculture too well and it's better not to have them poking around in it."

"Gaining access to the account would make things easier," I continued, "but I'm no hacker, either, so I'm grateful you could get what you got, Gregg."

"I'll keep trying," he said. "We're going to need Mark's cooperation to file a complaint with Yahoo to close the account. I checked into it and the request has to come from him, in writing."

“You stick to it and I’ll see if I can line up Mark to write a letter asking Yahoo to shut the bogus account.”

I had good reasons to call Mark Carey anyway, and he’d likely be all for writing the letter to stop the account. Maybe they’d even let him prove his identity and see how it was used.

Mark was so happy to hear that circumstantial evidence had piled up in his favor that he said he’d write the letter to Yahoo that afternoon. I asked him to let me know how Yahoo responded.

I couldn’t resist hitting Mark with one final question. “So, who do you suspect?”

“Karen McClain would be one possibility, but there’s nothing concrete,” Mark paused.

“I can see that,” I acknowledged. “She seems like someone who could send a fan-friend’s private correspondence to their employer if she believed that she was justified in bringing the letter to the board’s attention.”

“But Cele’s letter expressed so much remorse for even *thinking* of doing something violent,” Gregg countered.

“Yes, but consider this: the learned and wise educators of the Clark Count School District totally misread Cele’s comments. It’s not so hard to believe that someone, say Karen, might’ve misread Cele’s letter in the first place and thought it was much more dangerous than it actually was.”

“And Karen and Cele argue about the educational system at just about every meeting. Maybe that context could’ve colored Karen’s interpretation,” Mark offered.

“That’s reasonable and logical,” I replied, “but there’s no proof. We’re still building unsupported scenarios.”

“I imagine everyone we know is doing the same,” Mark said glumly.

“That’s part of the damage something like this can do to a group like ours,” I replied. “People start guessing, some of them with incomplete or wrong information, and suspicion flies everywhere!”

“Maybe Yahoo will help,” he said. “I need help, Frank.”

“I’ll try to get it,” I said, “but no one thinks you did it.”

“Maybe so,” he allowed, “but I hate the suspicion. Even fans who say to my face, ‘it couldn’t possibly be *you*, Mark’, may have secret, nagging doubts that will subtly poison everything I do in Fandom from this point.”

“I have a bad feeling there’ll be plenty of suspicion to go around,” I said. I was already dreading next Friday’s Insurgents meeting on that score.

“Yes, but it’s my name on that damn email,” he protested. “If this thing isn’t finished quickly, Frank, I feel like it’ll leave a lot of fans with the mistaken idea that it was *me* who betrayed Cele.” There was a wailing quality to his voice that I’d never noticed.

The situation was devouring Mark’s calm and confidence. He’d been great so far, getting me to investigate, but the prospect of losing his stainless fannish reputation had him on the edge.

I was glad Mark planned to write that letter to Yahoo immediately. The longer he delayed the less certain he’d be able to do it effectively and reliably.

“Speaking of letters,” I began as casually as I could manage, given the thundering thump of my heart, “it would be good to get a look at the version of Cele’s letter the school got.”

“You think there are clues?” Mark asked.

“We won’t know until we see it,” I said.

“So you’ll call whomever it is at the school...”

“... Phyllis Kerwood, Dean of Faculty...”

“OK, so you’ll call Ms. Phyllis Kerwood, Dean of Faculty...”

“Not me, Mark, you,” I corrected. That was the reason for my anxiety. I needed Mark to do it; they wouldn’t cooperate with me.

“Me?” he asked.

“Yeah, it has to be you,” I reiterated. “They’re not going to let me see it and Phyllis Kerwood didn’t show it to Cele when she could’ve, so it’s up to you.”

“Do you think she’ll help?”

“We won’t know until you talk to her,” I said as I got out the slip of paper with her name and number. I read it to him slowly, so he could copy it down.

“I’ll call her on Monday,” Mark promised.

“I recommend you tell her that you aren’t concerned with the Cele Corbin Case, only in the potential fraudulent use of your identity.”

“Thanks for the tip,” Mark said. “I’ll let you know what happens.”

I repeated all the reassuring phrases I could think up and disengaged from the conversation. I couldn’t really change Mark’s mood with oratory; only proving his innocence could liberate him from his mounting apprehension.

Chapter Eleven

An Unwelcome Visit

There was one interview I'd been dreading since the minute I started nosing around the Circle of Nine, the Fractured Circle. Paul hadn't flamed me by name, but I was fairly sure that he included me among the "fakefans, traitors and false friends" he had attacked in his now-infamous behind-the-back electronic rant.

While a few of the less experienced Insurgents tried to be "friends with everybody," the more knowledgeable ones, including me, chose to stand with their maligned friends and keep their distance from Paul.

The split was especially hard for the Corbins, because Cele Corbin and Jennifer Gottlieb are first cousins. Each was an only child, so they were more like sisters. When Paul blasted several Insurgents, including Steve, relations between the Corbins and the Gottliebs became chilled. I had the impression that Steve wasn't talking to Paul these days, but I'd need to confirm that with him.

No one, not even the Careys, who host the twice-monthly Insurgents meetings, pressured the newer fans to take a stand. About the only way to learn that lesson is through experience. You either understood and you did what was right, what was ethical, or you didn't understand and should be allowed to stay out of it and just observe for future reference.

Paul and I had no reason to fight, but I still wasn't looking forward to interviewing him. At least I didn't have to question Jennifer, presumably while Paul watched warily, since she was certainly not part of the case despite her receipt of Cele's email. Jennifer was about the least likely suspect. I couldn't entirely dismiss the possibility, but I'd have to eliminate every other possibility before I'd need to resort to her as the possible culprit.

"This is Frank Blaine," I said when I heard someone pick up the Gottlieb's phone.

"This is Paul," came the answer. He waited for me to say something more.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Paul, but I think it would be a good idea for us to talk about the thing that recently happened to Cele Corbin," I said.

"You got something on your mind, Frank?" He sounded very defensive. Who could blame him, considering the circumstances? Evidently, he thought I suspected him.

"Please, Paul, it isn't what you think. I just need a little help."

"All right," he said without much enthusiasm. He was waiting for the verbal shiv between the ribs.

"I assume you know by now that someone, using a screen name meant to give the impression that Mark Carey was the forwarder, sent Cele's email to the school board and got her fired." I launched a silent hope that Paul had followed the story and wouldn't need a lot of elaboration by me.

"I'm not too fond of Mark Carey right now," Paul explained unnecessarily. "but I don't believe he forwarded that email. It wouldn't make sense. He wouldn't attack me for supposedly breaking a DNQ and then do the same thing himself a couple of months later."

I didn't quibble about the "supposedly." I didn't agree with it, but an argument with Paul Gottlieb wouldn't have done anyone any good.

"One of the reasons I'm calling, Paul, is to assure you that no one suspects either you or Jenn of doing this," I told him.

"Thank you, Fran. That's appreciated." His voice suddenly lost most of its tense edge.

Most, but not all of it. Paul still wasn't sure that I wasn't about to spring some huge, unpleasant surprise.

"Maybe Mark's name was used to fool people into thinking *you* might be trying to continue the feud by

framing him," I told him. "Mark knows it wasn't you who fitted him for that noose. It's an obvious frame."

"That's decent of him," Paul allowed. "You think the rat who forwarded the email wanted to cause a blow up?"

"It's a possibility, Paul," I conceded.

"I'm happy to help prove the idea wrong," he said.

"The perpetrator could be lying low, waiting for us to rip into each other," I agreed.

"Score one for Fandom," he said.

"I'm doing some investigating into the whole situation," I explained. "Do you have any thoughts on this mess? You know, anything that might help put it to rest?"

"Of the nine fans who got Cele's email," Paul said, "I think it could be Karen McClain, but it's more of a hunch than something I can prove. I wouldn't want you to repeat that," he added hastily.

"I want to stop the suspicion, not spread it around," I assured Paul. "You aren't the first to put Karen's name on the table. Karen could be the one, but I have a lot more digging to do before I'd be comfortable about naming her."

"There's someone else," Paul ventured.

"Who?"

"Maria Handel," he said.

"Do you know her?" I asked. "What makes you suspicious?"

"No, I don't and that's just it, I don't know her," he replied. "Jennifer doesn't, either."

"Don't worry, I'll be checking into her."

"I hope you'll let me know when you find the person who did this," Paul said, "because as soon as we know for sure, that fan is history at the Las Vegas Science Fantasy Society!"

"I'll let you know when I have something," I promised.

"If there is any way I can help, let me know," he said. "Do you need to talk to Jennifer?"

"Honestly, Paul, she's even less likely than you as a suspect in this thing," I said. "Let's not bother her unless it's strictly necessary, which I don't think it is at this time."

"I'll talk to her," he offered. "If she has anything that could help, we'll get in touch."

"Thanks," I said. "So far, everyone has kept their heads. Let's hope that continues."

"Your call was a big help," he said. "And, Frank..." His voice tailed off into a pause.

"Yes, Paul," I encouraged.

"Uh, that is..." he tried again. "I want you to know that I have nothing against you personally."

"Thanks, Paul," I relied. "Maybe after this is over,

you and the Insurgents..." Now it was my turn to finish weakly.

"Maybe, Frank," he said.

Just before he and I disconnected, I heard a deep sigh.

The next thing I did after finishing with Paul was to call Steve Corbin with some more questions. He answered the phone and, after the usual pleasantries, shouted to Cele to come sit near him while he talked to me, in case he needed information from her.

"What do you need?" he asked.

"First, I was wondering if either of you showed Cele's email to anyone besides the original Circle of Nine?" I heard a buzz of conversation.

Steve turned his attention back to me. "Cele assumes that the other halves of couples would see it, but she doesn't know specifics."

"That's about what I expected," I conceded. "When Cele sent her email, did any of the recipients contact her?"

The muffled buzz returned as Steve relayed the question to Cele with a protective hand covering the mouthpiece.

"She heard from everyone within 24 hours of sending her email," Steve summarized. "Everyone wrote or called Cele within a day."

"What'd they say?" More whispers.

"They all expressed support and sympathy about the incident."

That stunned me into silence.

"All of them?" I nagged. "They all contacted Cele to commiserate and show support?" It sounded nice. It sounded like the way Fandom is supposed to work, especially within a close-knit group like the Insurgents.

Again, there was a pause for consultation with Cele.

"Cele says everyone was really nice about it," Steve said. That's why she was so shocked when one of them sent the email to the school board.

"And what about after you sent the follow-up about Cele's firing?" I waited while they talked it over.

"Jennifer and Paul were the first callers, Mark, Dan, Gregg and Naomi all wrote, called or both. Neither of us heard from Karen McClain after I sent my update."

"And since then?" I said, trying to draw him out a little more.

"Let me check," he said. "No, neither of us has had any real contact with Karen since then."

That told me I'd have to check with Marsha Carey to see if Karen had also been absent from a string of Insurgents meetings. I had the impression she hadn't

been around much since Christmas, but the denizens of the living room at Insurgents meetings sometimes came and went unnoticed by the fans who lingered in the rest of the house for most of the night.

“What about Maria Handel?” I asked, trying to keep any special emphasis out of my voice. Just an ordinary question about the most mysterious and enigmatic member of the Circle of Nine, that’s all.

The conversational temperature took a sudden nosedive, which wasn’t at all what I’d expected. Steve’s hesitancy made Maria Handel even more interesting to me. I knew I would have to find out a lot about her before I could finish the case.

“Cele says she called right after the incident,” Steve said.

“What about after you sent your update?”

“I sent her the update, because she was on Cele’s list,” he said, “but I don’t really know her too well. She would’ve contacted Cele directly, if anybody. I’ll check.” They had a couple of exchanges, but I couldn’t make out the words. “Cele says she didn’t hear from her about it.”

“What about Carolyn Profetti?” I asked.

“She didn’t get either email,” Steve said.

“Even so, could you ask Cele?”

“Sure,” he said. I imagined he was starting to feel like a human ping pong ball. “Carolyn called the afternoon of the incident,” Steve reported. “She came over and sat with Cele at least a couple of hours”

“Do you remember anything about Carolyn’s attitude that day?” I asked. It was a meaningless question, meant only to test a sudden hunch.

“I d-don’t know,” Steve replied.

“You don’t know?”

“She mostly visits when I’m not there.”

“Don’t you think that’s a little strange?”

“Don’t you think most fans are strange?” he countered. “Maybe she just doesn’t like me that much.”

“I don’t know if Carolyn likes many people that much.” When I heard myself say it, I realized it was not just my attempt to make Steve feel better about Carolyn Profetti not liking him much. Whether due to shyness or some other cause, Carolyn had rightly earned the reputation of being aloof and hard to approach.

“She was really there for Cele,” Steve blurted into the silence.

“What about after the firing?” I asked.

“Well, uh, Cele hasn’t had a chance to talk to her,” Steve said. “Maybe she felt she shouldn’t be too clingy at a time like this.”

I had to wonder why he was making excuses for her and then it hit me: Steve talked about the mysterious Maria Handle like he knew whom she was. I could-

n’t resist the opening. “Who is Maria Handel, Steve?”

“I-I don’t know,” he said.

“C’mon, Steve, I’m trying to help Cele,” I said. “If you know who Maria Handel is, it’s important that you tell me and tell me now.”

Silence.

“Steve, I’m running out of suspects,” I pleaded. “One of the only people I haven’t been able to eliminate is this Maria Handel.”

“But I promised her I wouldn’t tell,” he replied.

“Then you do know” I said.

“Yes, but I promised not to tell,” he repeated.

“I can’t work blind in addition to everything else. If you and Cele won’t level with me, I’m not sure I can continue,” I said. “And if someone doesn’t get some answers pretty damn soon, it’s going to seriously hurt the Insurgents. It might even kill the club.” That was an exaggeration and my threat to quit the investigation was a calculated bluff, but Steve had no way of knowing that I didn’t plan to quit this case until I nailed it down cold.

“Please, Frank, don’t quit on us,” he said. “I’ll help you anyway I can, but I promised Cele and it would break all kinds of DNQs...”

“I see your position, but I hope you can see my situation, too” I said. I took a deep breath. Steve had been one of my fannish mentors 20 years or so ago and it wasn’t easy to lecture him about things I knew he already knew, because he’d taught them to me.

“Rules are fine as long as they don’t get in the way,” I continued. “Fandom isn’t about rules; it’s about treating each other with kindness and respect as fellow fans.”

“The DNQ is an important concept in Fandom and I don’t think either of us wants to break one. I would never break a DNQ under ordinary circumstances, but when breaking a DNQ would be of such great benefit to the person who laid it on in the first place. I’d put individual people ahead of the general rule.”

“So would I,” Steve agreed. “Maybe I can get Cele to release me from her DNQ.”

“Whether she does or doesn’t,” I pressed, “please think about what we just discussed. I need to know about Maria Handel to do anything with the case.”

“I’ll talk to her,” he repeated.

“I’ll call you tomorrow and we’ll talk some more,” I stated.

Chapter Twelve

A Palmer Reading

I called Naomi Palmer a couple of times on Sunday afternoon, but all I got was her voice mail. I was still sitting in my den two hours later when the phone rang.

“Hello, Frank,” Naomi Palmer said to me.

“Thanks for calling, Naomi,” I replied.

“Sorry I missed your call.”

“I appreciate you calling back so quickly,” I said, mostly because I didn’t have anything much to say. Naomi and I had had our fling and moved on, but we’d never been entirely comfortable with each other since it had come to its inevitable end.

“So, is there something I can do for you?” she asked

“Yes, there is,” I said. “I wanted to see if I could come over and talk.”

“Talk?” she said. “Will it lead to action?”

“I don’t know,” I said, not quite playing the game she had in mind. “It’s about Cele and her letter and getting fired and all of that.”

“Why you?”

“I got asked to investigate,” I said. “I’m trying to figure out who did what and put the whole thing to rest.”

“Why me?”

“You were part of the Circle of Nine, the people who received Cele’s original email,” I replied. “I’m trying to talk to everyone.”

“That’s reasonable,” she said. “Sure, when would you like to come?”

“Whenever it’s convenient,” I said. I’d make any

suggestion work. Scheduling difficulties were the last thing I needed.

“I’ll be home this afternoon and tonight,” she offered, “unless that’s too soon?”

“I’m free now. How about in an hour?” I asked.

She agreed, I hung up and started to get my stuff together to go across town to Summerlin, where Naomi lived in a small, but rather luxurious, condo.

Her wealthy ex-husband, a non-fan, had left her for a 22-year-old personal trainer, but the alimony checks arrived with commendable regularity. Naomi Palmer wrote professionally, occasionally, but she didn’t have to strain too much or take every assignment that came her way, thanks to the fat financial cushion under her.

The advantages were obvious, but I thought there was also a downside. She might’ve written more, and better, if she’d felt the cold breath of poverty on her neck.

It took me a little over an hour to reach Naomi’s door, where one thump on the doorbell button produced a cascade of notes that added up to something classical and summoned Naomi to open it for me.

“It’s good to see you, Frank,” Naomi said.

“It’s good to see you, too,” I said with less relish than I truly felt. It was extremely good to see Naomi, especially in the thin, skin-hugging white pants and equally tight, scoop-neck red top,

“Was it something in particular?” Naomi asked. “Or were you just touching base.”

The invitation was there, in her voice, but I didn't RSVP. I ignored it. Donna was on my mind too much for me to think about re-starting things. Clocking my hesitation, she favored me with a side view of her lush silhouette

Naomi Palmer radiated what people once called "animal magnetism" and men were usually like piles of iron filings. I don't know what they call it now, but she still has it. I wasn't immune to her throaty voice or eye-popping physique, but I deliberately chose to pretend indifference to her allure.

"Like I said on the phone, I need to talk with you about what happened to Cele," I said. "Mark Carey asked me to do it, but Steve and Cele are on board." I didn't want her to think I was just being nosy.

"And you're here to question me, because you think I did it?" her voice rose in pitch and volume toward the end, a mixture of alarm and anger.

"Absolutely not!" I said quickly. "You're definitely not a suspect." OK, so I exaggerated a little. Naomi was a certifiable longshot as a potential culprit and that was close enough, at least for purposes of this conversation.

"I didn't mean to get hot about *that*," she said with an inflexion that Mae West would've envied. "I like to save the heat for more appropriate opportunities."

I ignored that, too. Instead of rising to her challenge, I walked down the short hallway that connected the living room to the front door and grabbed a hunk of couch. I was careful to sit toward one end, but not right against the armrest. If I knew Naomi, and I did, she would've sat down right next to me and pinned me against the upholstered, velvet-covered arm of the couch.

When she did exactly that, I still had enough room to move slightly away from her, towards the arm. Nothing was said by either of us, but now we both knew that this wasn't going to be play-time.

"You said you got into this because of Mark Carey?" she asked.

"I guess you didn't hear," I said. "The screen name on Cele's email sent to the school board was Mark's."

"I can't believe it!" she exclaimed.

"I don't think anyone else does, either," I replied. "I'm trying to find out who stole Mark's identity to send the email that got Cele fired."

"I was uncomfortable with some of the things Cele said at Insurgents meetings as well as about her incident," Naomi admitted, "but doing what that fan did is awful."

"Dragging in Mark's name, possibly with the intention of re-starting a Gottlieb-Carey feud, makes it even worse," I told her.

"Yes, that's downright nasty," she agreed. "Cele could benefit from counseling, to help her deal with the trauma, but sending her letter to the school without even talking to her is despicable. Under Mark's name is just plain mean."

"It isn't the act of a good friend or a good fan," I seconded. "Who do you think might have done it?"

"That's hard to say." I waited while she looked thoughtful, and pretended to grope for an opinion she already had. Naomi is not shy about her opinions, so I know she was busily formulating the best way to present it before beginning to speak.

Sure enough, it wasn't long before Naomi tired of that pantomime, feigned an epiphany and plunged into her analysis. "There's more than one member of the Insurgents who has argued with Cele at Insurgents and other places..."

"You mean the Pentapus?" I said, interrupting. I didn't want to hear Naomi Palmer's smoothly seamless set-piece. Mention of the secret women's apa could jolt her out of the comfort zone. Maybe something unexpectedly helpful would emerge from the spontaneity.

"Oh, you know about that?" she blurted. "Well, you *are* a detective."

"I know Pentapus is a secret apa smothered in DNQs, but I hope you can help me on this," I said.

"I respect DNQs," she stated. "I won't show you the mailings or tell you, in detail, who said what."

"I understand, Naomi," I replied. "I don't want you to break a lot of DNQs, just bend them."

"A DNQ is a DNQ," she said firmly, brushing aside my attempt to lighten the mood.

"Yes, but what about a DNQ that lets someone despicable get away with this kind of betrayal." I used "despicable," her word, to try to bring the reality home to her.

"You ask your questions and we'll see." Her phrasing said "suggestion," but her tone conveyed "command."

"A group of female Insurgents started Pentapus, right?" I began.

"Yes."

"You, Cele, Jennifer, Donna and Karen started it?"

"That's right. I think Jennifer and Cele got the idea and they recruited the rest of us." She recalled.

"Pentapus has five members?"

"That's where we got the name," she said. I'd figured that out, but softball questions are part of the interrogation process. It makes the subject feel like they are in control, staying on top of things.

"Is Pentapus looking to expand?" I posed.

"Thinking of gender reassignment, Frank?" she sad and laughed.

"I'm planning to stick with the one I've got," I said, only noticing the pun in retrospect. I wasn't in a humorous mood.

I looked at her expectantly and, finally, she continued. "The group is... receptive... to adding members, though we haven't actually done it yet," Naomi said. "One more and we could change the name to 'Sextapus'."

"Were other Insurgents under consideration?" I pressed.

"Yes

"Who?"

"I can't say!"

"Can't or won't?" I challenged. I had switched to a full wind-up and was firing questions at major league velocity.

"A little of both," she shot back. "The DNQs..."

"Is more than one person being considered right now?"

"Not really," she answered. "Pentapus may expand or it may not. We're not in any hurry."

"Do you think the person you're considering for membership knows?"

"Probably not," she said. There was a pause during which she must've evaluated the comment, because she added: "I don't know. Maybe Cele told her, since she's the one who proposed her."

"Has anyone been proposed for membership and then rejected?"

"No, we've only talked about one potential addition," said Naomi, "and she looks like she'll get an invitation the way things are going."

"Is there a lot of feuding in Pentapus?"

"Fans like to argue," she said.

"True."

"Pentapus hasn't had a real fight," she said.

"Everyone avoids topics like the Big Rift."

"Sensible," I agreed. I wondered if anyone had done a correlation between the lower number of feuds and the larger percentage of women in Core Fandom. Maybe I'd write something about that, but this wasn't the time to map out a fan article. "Are there any women who maybe were closer than they are now?" I ventured.

"That's getting close to DNQ territory," Naomi warned me. "I don't mind forbidden territory, but this is one place I don't want to go." There it was, again, that insinuating sexiness that had attracted me, and just about every other male fan, to her.

"OK, how about this," I offered. "Let's forget Pentapus for a second. Let's talk over all, the meetings and so forth."

"OK," she said.

"Overall, is there a friendship that seems strained or even broken?" I asked.

"I hadn't thought about a carry-over," she said.

"What do you mean 'carry-over'?" I asked.

"When I discuss something at the *meeting*," she said with deliberate emphasis, "I give my opinion and I give it strong, Even if it gets heated, when the discussion is over, it's over. I forget it. Shake the mental etch-a-sketch."

"It's a good idea," I said.

"Maybe there are Insurgents who can't do that," she suggested.

"I guess at least one doesn't," I said.

"More than one," Naomi countered.

"Like who?"

"Karen McClain, Carolyn Profetti, sometimes even Cele."

"Carolyn wasn't part of the Circle of Nine," I said.

"Oh, right," Naomi said. "Too bad."

"Huh?"

"She's a newcomer, so it wouldn't seem so bad if she failed to understand the Insurgents and Fandom."

"You think Karen did it?" I queried.

"Yes, I do," she said. "Karen reacted very strongly to what Cele told everyone at the Insurgents meeting about the incident. Karen went on and on about the safety of the students. Donna and I tried to talk her down a little and I thought we succeeded, but who knows?"

It was time to wrap up the session. I had some more digging to do as a result of what Naomi had told me.

"Thanks for talking about this, Naomi," I said.

"You're welcome, Frank. You're always welcome," Naomi vamped and hung up.

Chapter Thirteen

I Don't Like Mondays

I had to put the case on hold, temporarily, on Monday morning, and do some things to guarantee that my next rent check wouldn't bounce.

So I spent the morning and afternoon serving papers, checking my email and doing a couple of hours of surveillance work for a department store in the Meadows Mall.

I hung around the store's watch and jewelry department and tried to look like a bored, hen-pecked husband waiting for his high-maintenance wife to get done spending his money.

It worked.

Within 20 minutes, I'd blended into the scenery and in 20 more I fingered the shoplifting team that had been tapping the store's jewelry selection like a private ATM.

The two-person team wasn't very subtle, but they got the job done. While the woman tried on everything within reach, her well-dressed male companion's hands magically picked items out of the trays that the clerk piled up on the counter in no particular order as she tried to steer the woman to what she hoped would be a high-commission sale.

The cell phone rang while I was still driving home from that assignment. I let it go to voice mail. With my luck, picking it up would earn me an unexpected rendezvous with a representative of Las Vegas Metro and a great big traffic citation.

I couldn't afford that luxury, so I let it ring.

I got home, pre-heated the oven and was just about

to start a frozen pizza when the cell rang again. The pizza would take a while anyway, so I put it on the rack, still frozen, and caught Gregg Messinger's call on the second chorus of the "Charge!" ring-tone.

"Hello, Gregg."

"How's the case going?" he said, rushing ahead in his eagerness to get the latest.

"I'm still talking to people," I replied. "I'm not ready to name a suspect."

"But you're making progress, aren't you?" he asked, anxiously.

"I'd say so," I told him. "We're making progress. And speaking of progress..."

"... I know, you want info about the account," he said before I could finish the sentence.

"Yes," I said. "Is anything happening there?"

"Like I told you, I'm not a hacker, but I've tried every legal thing I knew how to do."

"And?"

"Not much," he admitted. "I got the system to give me an alternate email address, but it's just a bunch of 'x's. There was one thing, though.

"What's that?" For a moment, a shortcut to the solution stretched through my mind in all its luminous intensity,

"The alternative address has a dot e-d-u extension," he said. "The address has 10 'x's, then @. Four 'x's for the domain name, dot, 'edu'." Those lights went dark just as quickly. I was stranded in this jungle of a case again.

I wrote down the email address, noting the blanks, and read it back to him.

"That's it," he said.

"So the culprit is employed by the school district," I said.

"No," he said.

"No?"

"Employees of the Clark County School District have email addresses with a 'dot net' extension."

"What about those four 'x's for the domain name?" I asked. "Can we pin down the domain?"

"Unfortunately, no," Gregg said. "There are too many four-letter domains around here." I muttered a few four-letter words of my own. None of them was a domain name, but they made me feel a little better.

"It's a dead end as far as leading to finding out who did it," I said. "It still may come in handy, if Mark gets anywhere with Yahoo."

"You haven't talked to him yet?"

"He's next on my list, after you."

"Is there anything else I can do?" Gregg asked. "I could go through directories..."

"I appreciate the offer, Gregg, but let's leave that as a last resort. There are so many domain names that fit the missing letters in the email address," I told him. "For all we know, the domain isn't even located in Las Vegas."

"Still, if it would help..."

"No, no, Gregg, it's not worth it," I assured him, trying to get my enthusiastic fellow Insurgent off the hook. We might have to grind through domain names and directories, but I didn't want to stick him with the work unless it was absolutely necessary.

"If you say so, Frank," he said, dubiously.

"Listen, I promise to call on you if I need any more help," I promised, "and it's very likely that I will."

"OK," he said. "Sorry I couldn't get more."

"It's all right, Gregg," I again assured him. "You did what you could and I appreciate it."

I knew he still didn't feel good about not getting more information, but Greg would have to come to terms with that by himself. All I could do was thank him again, promise to keep him updated and say that I'd be sure to call if I needed his help.

When I finally got off the phone with Gregg, I checked my voice mail and found one waiting from Mark Carey. Mark didn't go in for long, detailed messages and this time was no different. His voice mail gave his name, the time of his call and a request for a callback.

"So, Mark, your message sounded pretty eager," I said. "Did you find out anything?"

"I got a response from Yahoo," he said. "The email

didn't say 'yes,' but it didn't say, 'no,' either." Like any good writer, Mark opened his dissertation with an intriguing tease. I wished he'd skipped the literary trimmings, but you have to give people space to tell their stories in their own way. If not, it ends up taking longer than if you'd said nothing and let the speakers do it their way.

"Yahoo expressed concern about the possibility of one of their accounts being used for identity fraud," Mark continued, justifying my patience. "They sent me some forms and said that if we can get the header information off the email the school district received, they can verify its real source."

"Pretty much what I expected," I acknowledged. "It's good news, Mark, because it gives us a shot at eventually cracking the bogus account and finding out who's behind it. Minimum, Yahoo will close the account and stop any more problems from *that* source."

"I see what you mean," Mark said, his tone brightening a bit. "I filled out the forms and sent them back to Yahoo."

"Great," I said. "What about getting hold of the email as received by the school?"

"I called Cele and asked her who'd told her about the email," Mark explained. "She gave me the name Phyllis Kerwood, the Dean of Faculty for the Clark County School District."

"Have you talked to Dean Kerwood?" I asked, suppressing a flood of questions about the school official.

"By the time I got the name and number from Cele, it was too late to call," Mark said. "I'll hit it first thing tomorrow morning though. I'm hoping she'll just read the header to me over the phone."

So did I. I wasn't looking forward to a face-to-face showdown with a school official, so I was glad that Mark had stepped up to follow that line of inquiry. "I'd wait till 10 AM or so," I counseled. "They'll be done with the start-of-day routine, but they won't have their mind on lunch."

"That makes sense," he said. "Got any ideas about how I should handle Dean Kerwood?"

"You'll have to get a sense of her attitude as quickly as possible," I warned. "I recommend that you emphasize that you're *not* in any way trying to re-open the Cele Corbin Case. Your interest is completely and solely the theft of your identity."

"I'll call you tomorrow to tell you what happens," he said.

"Sounds good," I told him. "Talk to you then."

Chapter Fourteen

A Circle of... Friends?

After the conversation with Mark, I decided it was time to again grapple with my case notebook. If I was expecting the name of the guilty person to leap off the page at me, I was disappointed. The mysteries remained mysterious, though I'd added a lot to my arsenal of evidence.

No that it didn't turn out to be worth the time I invested.

The more I looked at what I had, the more it came down to just two things: The first was that there might be animosity between Cele and any of several fringe members of the Insurgents who hung out in the living room during meetings. The other was that I absolutely needed to find out a lot more about Maria Handel.

Not that those were the only questions. Cele had plenty of information that I needed. At the risk of wearing out my welcome with the Careys, I decided to phone her and see if I could coax a little information before I went over to the Corbins on Tuesday or Wednesday.

My excuse for calling between visits was that I wanted to give her a progress report. That took the first 10 minutes of the phone call and put her in a somewhat happier mood, since it was obvious that I did have some progress to report.

"I know you're still thinking about a couple of things, Cele," I said, edging into the real meat of my call, "and I won't repeat those questions, but there are some other things that would really help my investigation."

"What things?" she replied, suddenly on guard.

"Cele, we don't have to talk now if you don't want to," I said quickly. "It's just that you could assist me,

and the case, with some information that would really help."

A deep sigh came through the phone at me..

"All right, Frank," she said. "I do want to help."

"Don't worry," I soothed. "If I ask something you don't feel you can answer, just say so and I'll move on to something else."

"Thanks, Frank," she said. I thought she might have something she wanted to tell me, but that moment passed. Instead, she just said, "I'm ready" and went silent.

"Can you tell me what you were thinking when you wrote your email?" I hoped this would be a tension-easing softball. "What I mean is, why did you decide to write the letter?"

"I was very, very upset," Cele recalled. "I thought that it would help me understand what had happened if I put it down on paper."

"And did it?"

"Sort of," she said. "It helped a little, but not enough. Steve and almost everyone else always wants me to write more personally and I thought it was an opportunity to do that."

"There's personal and then there's maybe *too* personal," I proposed and then smacked myself in the head for saying something that sounded so judgmental. "I'm sorry, Cele. It's twenty years as a detective telling me to never create evidence of a felony."

"My judgment was bad," she conceded. "I shouldn't have put it in a letter."

"It might've gone better if you'd confided in one or more of your close friends," I observed. The letter had spelled the difference between a brief suspension, capped with vindication for Cele, and a punitive firing.

"But that's 20-20 hindsight. Why did you pick the people you did?"

"Mostly, they're fans I talk to a lot at Insurgents," she said.

"Yes, but why send it to these specific ones?" I wondered. "Could I give you each of the names and get your reaction? It would give me some perspective on all of this."

"We can try that," she said in a way that told me she didn't think it was such a terrific idea. I'd have to be very careful.

"You sent it to Jennifer, because she's your sister, but why Paul," I said.

"I didn't want to create a secret between them," she answered. "I assumed she'd tell him about it, anyway." That's what I thought, too, but confirmation didn't hurt. "Paul could've felt snubbed if I didn't send him the email," she added after a short pause. "No sense creating additional friction."

"You and Donna have been friends a long time and so have you and the Careys," I said. "So those are obvious. No Marsha?"

"Marsha Carey is a very good friend," she said. The unspoken "but" caused an awkward silence.

"But?" I led, hoping she would follow. Sometimes, saying the unsaid provides a needed nudge.

"Not exactly a 'but'," she corrected. "I confided in Marsha immediately after it happened, so I didn't need to send her the written version."

"And when you sent the email to Mark, you were also eliminating the need for a secret between husband and wife," I finished. "What about Dan?"

"He's a very understanding and sympathetic person," she pointed out. "I talk to him a lot at Insurgents, too."

"And Donna?" I asked. "Was it because you are in Pentapuss with her?"

"Not entirely," she replied, "but I did send it to the other four members. It would have seemed strange not to send it to them."

"Yeah, I can see that," I said. "You sent it to Gregg..."

"Steve and I like Gregg," she said, a little defensively. "We have him over for dinner about once every two weeks. I wanted him to know what happened." She took a deep breath and then continued, "You don't think Gregg Messinger could have done this, do you?"

"I never suspected him," I said, shading the truth. I suspect everybody. "In fact, he has been very helpful in a couple of ways."

"It would be awful if he was the one who sent the letter to the school district!" I heard a slight catch in her voice toward the end of her sentence.

"Cele, it's terrible that *anyone* did it," I said, "but Greg is not an active suspect."

"I'm not going to ask you about the last member of the Circle of Nine right now," I assured her, "because that whole subject is for another day."

"I appreciate that, Frank."

"I'm a fan of my word," I said. "Cele, do you have someone you think might have done this to you?"

"I can hardly believe *any* of these people did it," she said, "even though I know that someone did."

"But isn't there someone who seems more likely to you?" I pressed.

"It's more that some of the people I sent the email seem less likely than others," she said carefully. "I don't see Jennifer, Paul, Mark, Dan, Donna, Gregg or Naomi doing it."

"Another way of saying that is that you think Karen McClain or Maria Handel are more likely than the others to have done it," I said.

"I-I guess so," she allowed. "I can't believe it's either of them."

"It has to be someone who had a copy of the letter," I said. "Are there any other people who read it?"

"Henry, maybe," she said.

"Yes, Donna told me that," I said. "Can you think of anyone else?"

"Maybe Marsha, though she already knew the details," Cele answered.

"She wouldn't meddle like that," I said. "And it wouldn't make sense for her to drag Mark's name into it."

"That's right," she said, not wanting to think Marsha guilty.

I asked a few more simple questions, like the dates of the incident and her letter, but I didn't really have anything else except the stuff we'd agreed not to talk about on the phone.

Chapter Fifteen

The Voices of Fandom

Tuesday afternoon, I got home at the end of another uneventful day of serving papers and working shoplifting detail at that Meadows Mall department store.

My feet throbbed from standing around all afternoon. I preferred process serving to surveillance, and there were a lot of other assignments that I liked better than either of those two types.

Unfortunately for the Blaine Investigations, I was spending the time I normally used to get the kind of cases I preferred on the Corbin Case and the Circle of Nine. I'd had the surveillance assignment lined up before I got busy with the fans and I could get the process-serving work by just showing up at the right time and place.

I hadn't had time to eat all day, unless you count the depressingly soft Kit Kat bar I got from a vending machine in the mall. So I went to the den by way of the refrigerator and had a salami-and-cheese on rye in one hand and a Diet Dr Pepper in the other by the time I sank into my padded office chair.

I grabbed the sandwich off the plate, had a second thought, and put it back down. I decided to start with an appetizer.

So I loaded my pipe and took a couple of soothing, decompressing puffs. By the time the small wooden bowl burned to ashes, I was readier than ever for the sandwich and soda.

As I chomped through the sandwich, I started to check the voice mail. The very first call was not exactly what I expected.

"OK, shamus, get off the case or you'll never go to Corflu again!" said a raspy voice, followed by a fairly good imitation of the unnerving cackle radio listeners used to hear on *The Shadow*. This might've shaken me up more if I hadn't recognized Gregg Messinger's voice despite his attempt to camouflage it and if he hadn't chuckled in his own voice after the Shadow-like cackle.

Sure enough, the message continued with Gregg apologizing for the dramatic start and asking me to call him.

The other voice mail was more prosaic and, probably more significant. Mark said he had an update for me.

"Is this Mr. Messinger? Mr. Gregory Messinger?" I asked in an unnaturally deep voice.

"Y-yes," he said, a bit off-balance.

"It has come to our attention, Mr. Messinger, that you have used our phone system to perpetrate nuisance calls. This is a serious felony, punishable by fine and imprisonment."

"But-but..."

"Ignorance of the law is no excuse," I thundered in my pseudo-bass voice.

Frank?" he asked, his voice unsteadily. "*Frank?*"

"Yeah, it's me. That'll teach you to joke."

"It's hard not to make jokes," he conceded. "This whole thing with Cele is so awful..."

"... that making jokes is a defense against depression," I finished for him.

"That's it, exactly," Gregg said

"Sometimes I feel like a player in one of those mystery party games," I told him. "Each person I talk to generally gives me one solid clue, like a round in one of those games."

"You mean you *wish* it was a game," Gregg said. He hit the bull's eye with that duty. Everyone would be a lot happier if it was a game, a hoax or anything except what it was.

There was no sense wallowing in fantasy scenarios, so I decided to change the subject. "Did you have something you wanted to tell me?" I asked. "Or were you hoping for an update?"

"I was curious about whether you'd been able to do anything with that fake account," he asked. For a second, I wondered if Gregg's interest meant involvement. I immediately dismissed it as ridiculous speculation.

And then I had a very depressing thought about how bad things had gotten if I suspected an enthusiastic true fan like Gregg Messenger, even for a second.

"I haven't spoken to Mark yet today, but I expect to later. He's working with Yahoo."

"That's good," Gregg said quickly. "Can I make a small suggestion?"

"Sure." It doesn't matter who thinks of a good idea as long as it does me some good.

"Marsha Carey keeps a log of who attends each Insurgent meeting," he said. "You might learn something if there are members who've suddenly stopped going."

"That's a great idea, Gregg," I said with genuine appreciation. "I'll call her as soon as we get off the phone."

"OK," he said. "I don't want to get in the way of the case. But if I can help you..."

"... I will call, Greg," I interrupted. "And again, thanks for that idea."

That's exactly what I did after ending the call with Gregg. I got Mark, but he understood what I wanted and quickly explained it to his wife.

"Want to wait or have us call back?" Steve asked while Jennifer consulted her book.

"I'd like to wait," I told him, "but you can just put down the phone until you're ready."

So I waited.

When someone picked up the phone again, it was Marsha. "Hello, Frank?"

"Hi, Marsha!" I greeted her. "Did you find anything?"

"I don't know if it means anything," she said, "but Karen and Naomi didn't make the meeting after Cele got fired."

"What about the meeting after that?"

"Karen wasn't there. Naomi was," she said. "Do you think it could be one of them?"

"I don't know, Marsha," I said honestly. "How about the meeting after that?" There was a short pause while Marsha turned pages.

"Both are on the list," she said. "Does that mean anything?"

"Honestly, Marsha, I'm not sure," I admitted. "Is there one you think might be the guilty person?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "I hope it's not Naomi or even Karen."

"Even Karen McClain?" I echoed. "Is there something about Karen?"

"I'm not saying it was her," Marsha replied, "but I think she's impulsive and a bit self-righteous. I don't

like to think this, but I can see her getting on her high horse and sending the email to the school district without stopping to consider the effect on Cele."

"I can see Karen doing that," I said, "except that the culprit took the time to transfer the email to a fraudulent account with your husband's name on it to send Cele's email to the school."

"I don't think Karen would do that," Marsha said. "If she forwarded Cele's letter to the school, she would do it under her own name and claim credit for a job well done."

"I'm not a big fan of Karen's," I said, "but I see what you mean. She certainly could've done it, but I'm not sure she would've done it *this* way." Karen was still a prime suspect, but Marsha's observation downgraded Karen from prime to choice.

I was about to wind up the call when I had one more idea.

"There's one more thing you could do for me," I said, "though it may take you a little longer than what we just did."

"Someone tried to cause trouble for Mark," she said. "What do you need me to do?"

"You know who comes to Insurgents and how often," I said. "Could you go back to the first meeting after Steve sent out the follow-up letter and see if anyone who is normally regular has stopped coming?"

"It might be a little hit-or-miss," she said, "but I'll do my best. I'll have Mark look at it, too."

"That would be great, I said. "And I want to thank you for the help, Marsha."

"That's fine, Frank," she answered.

"Oh, wait," I said before she could disconnect.

"Yes?"

"I almost forgot. Could I speak to Mark?"

"He had to make a run to the store," Marsha said, "but he told me to tell you that he would call you about 7:30."

"That'll be fine," I assured her.

Chapter Sixteen

Blues in the Night

I could tell when I picked up the phone and heard Mark's first words, that the news wasn't going to be very good. Or at least, he thought it was bad. The accents of dejection came through clearly when he said, "I'm calling as promised, Frank."

"Thanks for calling back, Mark." I hate to wait for calls, though I do it often enough, but Mark rang within a minute of the appointed time.

"I wish I had better news," he said. "It didn't go all that well."

"Don't worry about that," I said. "No investigation lacks obstacles and stalls."

"Yahoo wrote back again," he said. "Big surprise, they had more questions and sent more forms."

"I know it's a pain the ass," I started.

"Don't worry, Frank," he said, cutting me short. "I've already filled out the forms and sent them back to Yahoo." I sighed with relief. The last thing I needed was for Mark to lose heart and give it up as a waste of time.

"There's one thing," he said with a little more enthusiasm. "They did say, in their email, that Yahoo has suspended operation of the 'Mark Carey' account pending the outcome of the investigation."

"At least that will prevent any more funny business with that account," I said. "That's real progress." Except that it wasn't really such a big deal. I didn't think anyone would dare use that account again, especially with half of Las Vegas Fandom on the alert.

"Yahoo turned down my request for access to the account," he said, that downbeat attitude creeping back into his voice.

"Did they give a reason?"

"Just some crap about the legalities," he said. They said they need the identification number of the email from the header in order to track down the specific email.

"Maybe you could get that from the school district," I suggested.

"Ah, now we come to the amazing story of a woman whose name will live in infamy, Phyllis Kerwood, Dean of Faculty," Mark said melodramatically. "I called her office about six times, between yesterday and today, and I got nothing but an excuse each time."

"Maybe she was busy," I soothed.

"Maybe so, but most of what her assistant said sounded like horseshit to me," he replied. "I got so pissed off that I left work early and went to her office at the school district."

"How did *that* go?" I asked. "Did you even get to see her?"

"Yes, I did," he said. "Much good it did me."

"Hey, Mark, don't be so hard on yourself. Just getting to see someone like this Dean is an achievement."

"She was a self-important bitch," he stated so vehemently that I wouldn't have dreamt of contradicting him.

"How did you get to her?" I asked. I didn't mind Mark venting, and it seemed like he had ample reason, but I needed the facts.

"I went to the school district office and called Dean Kerwood again, this time from the parking lot on my cell," he explained. "Her assistant said she was in conference and couldn't be disturbed."

"What'd you do?"

"I hurried into the district office building, hurried to Dean Kerwood's office and took a chair in her outer office. That's where I stayed until she came out," he said. "I went up to her when she finally opened her office door and told her that I had a matter of some urgency and delicacy."

"What did she do?" I asked.

"She wasn't impressed at first until I told her that I was trying to prevent any negative publicity that might be coming to the Clark County School District. She asked me what it was, but I told her we had to go to her office, because it was too sensitive to discuss in the outer room."

“Did she listen to your story?” I wanted to know. “Did she help you?”

“Frank, this woman is some piece of work. I explained that I was trying to pursue the theft of my identity and did not want to bring in the media or the police, because that would lead to embarrassing publicity for the school district.

“From her reaction, I could tell that she was frightened that Cele’s dismissal would blow up in her face”

“It could be a headline local news story,” I agreed. “It would get pretty ugly by the time it played out. Cele is a very sympathetic figure next to the three white power racist gang bangers who threatened her. And remember, she handled the situation without violence.”

“Dean Kerwood probably doped it out the same

way,” I said.

“Near the start of the conversation, she told me the same thing she’d told Cele: that the email was forwarded to her by Mark66. Fifteen minutes later, she stated that she didn’t have the letter or access to it so that she couldn’t help me.”

“She was covering her ass,” I said. “You’re right about that.”

“Tomorrow, I’m going to try the same strategy on Thelma Oliver, Director of Community Relations for the school district.”

“She ought to be particularly sensitive about bad publicity,” I observed, “so it may even work better on her.”

“I’ll let you know what happens,” Mark said.

Chapter Seventeen

Stormy Wednesday

I could’ve spent Wednesday chasing wayward wives and delinquent debtors. I’d have to do that on Thursday, but this was already Wednesday and I had to interview someone I’d just as soon ignore, Karen McClain.

I didn’t, and still don’t, like the 40ish librarian. I don’t mean that I hate Karen McClain or have some serious dispute with her. I don’t even have anything bad to say about librarians or women in their 40s. It’s more that I hardly think of her as a fan or a friend. I don’t enjoy her company and do my best to minimize contact and limit it to safe superficialities.

She seemed so different from the rest of us that I’d even asked one or two of the senior Insurgents how she’d ever become a member of the club. One called her a “legacy,” like one of those people a so-

rity or fraternity is obligated to take, because Daddy or Mommy was a legacy.

Others, more polite or more perceptive, used phrases like “long-time Vegas fan” and pointed to Karen’s friendships with some of the original Insurgents.

That’s not the ideal set-up for a detective interview, but I didn’t have an option. I’d put off quizzing Karen as long as possible. Wednesday was one of her days off, so I had to do it then or risk not being able to question her for at least several days and maybe as much as a week.

I couldn’t convince myself that more delay would be a good idea. As much as I wasn’t looking forward to it, talking with Karen was vital. She was still the closest thing I had to a viable suspect. I needed to throw some

questions at her and see how she reacted, note what she said, and what she didn't say.

The only thing worse than me not liking Karen McClain is that Karen knew it and quite evidently wasn't any fonder of me than I was of her.

I waited until 10 am to avoid the risk of waking her on her day off. I wanted her in as good a mood as possible. Considering it was me calling her, her best-possible mood didn't figure to be all that great, anyway.

Finally, my fumbling fingers punched in her number.

Twice.

My subconscious was sending me a message, which I did my best to ignore. I hit the wrong buttons the first time. I hadn't realized I was that nervous. It's easier to talk to a complete stranger or a friend than someone with whom you've got a bad history.

She was surprised to hear from me and she didn't bother to hide the fact that this wasn't her idea of a pleasant morning surprise.

Desperately swimming upstream against the relentless current of her suspicion, I explained about my investigation and that I was interviewing everyone in the Circle of Nine, plus anyone able to provide information, to figure out who did what to whom.

That made the fact of the call less of an ambush confrontation, which would have done me, and the case, absolutely no good. Bounty Hunters may revel in their pseudo authority, but every PI knows that licenses can be revoked almost at whim.

Her first question wiped out that progress and then some. "So, you think I did it, right?" she accused. "It must be so much easier to suspect someone you don't like."

And so, five minutes into the call, we arrived at exactly the destination I wanted to avoid. I sure didn't want an adversarial interrogation with a highly defensive Karen McClain as the hostile witness.

"C'mon, Karen, I'm talking to everyone who got both emails from the Corbins," I pleaded. "Plus, I'm trying to collect evidence from anyone who has any."

"Am I the first person you've called?" she asked.

"You're not the first and you're not going to be the last," I said. "And, yes, you are a suspect, at least as much as the other eight people who received those letters – and anyone who might've seen them, second-hand."

"Well, ok," she said without real conviction. "What did you want?"

"I'd like to come over and talk to you about the whole business," I said. I paused and then added: "All

I'm trying to do, Karen, is put an end to the uncertainty and paranoia. I just want to solve the mysteries and let everyone get past it."

"Stop selling me," she quipped. "I already said I would talk to you."

We hassled each other for another five minutes before agreeing that I should just get in my car and drive over to her place in Summerlin. It made me realize that she was at least as eager as I was to get this done and over.

Her mood hadn't lightened appreciably when I knocked on her door about 35 minutes later. She greeted me with the same warm delight that she might have lavished on a home invasion squad.

I pretended not to notice when Karen opened the door only wide enough for me to squeeze through into the tiny front hallway. Once I'd negotiated this contrived bottleneck, she greeted me with a grunt and led me into the living room off the entrance. I made believe I didn't notice, because that's what the investigation needed me to do.

I thought about slinging a few compliments about the house and her jeans-and-sweater outfit, but I decided to skip the flattery. Karen was so on-guard that it would have boomeranged. Denied the weapon of subterfuge, I fell back on its diametric opposite, honesty.

"What did you think when you read Cele's email?" I asked without any preamble.

"I thought she was whining and being an attention-whore," Karen stated with consummate bluntness. Not much on sympathy, though.

"What about the actual incident?" I posed.

"I thought Cele did a good job," she replied, without reservation. "I just wish she hadn't gone to pieces like that after doing so well."

"What about the danger to the school kids?" I asked. "Isn't that a problem?"

"I don't see it that way," she answered. "One small woman cornered by three racist gangbangers? She averted violence, nobody got hurt and she defused the situation without causing a bigger scene than necessary."

"So you generally agreed with what Cele did?"

"Of course!" Karen said. "Sending that letter was stupid, but there's nothing wrong with the way Cele handled the incident."

"But you argue about education with Cele a lot at Insurgent meetings, don't you?" I wanted to provoke her a little. Not enough to cause a blow-up, but maybe enough to get a hasty answer. I also wanted to see how a little anger, like in an argument with Cele, would affect her.

"Yes, I do," Karen said. "I think Cele is a soft-

headed liberal when it comes to the schools. There ought to be much more authority, and control, to make the schools safe for learning.”

I could visualize Karen’s high horse materializing under her as she articulated her position. Karen went on to outline her perfect educational world, which included school uniforms, counter-signed hall passes and the hickory stick.

I’m more comfortable with a freer structure – and some modern textbooks. I let her rant on about the failure of the public schools for a while, since she obviously felt strongly about the subject. I wondered if she felt strongly enough to forward Cele’s letter.

“Still, don’t you think that Cele’s letter hinted at some... instability?” I ventured.

“Some counseling would help Cele,” Karen replied, ‘but that’s something I would suggest to her directly and privately, not like what this fan did to her!’”

Karen’s eyes narrowed into a death-ray stare. I didn’t know why she’d gone back to this tune, but I didn’t want to play along. “You think it’s me, don’t you?”

“I suspect everybody,” I reminded her without apology.

“That’s some world you live in,” she noted.

“It’s the world of a detective, Karen,” I admitted to her. “It’s not something that’s easy for me to turn off when I’m investigating, even if it’s something about Fandom. I’m just asking the questions to get the answers I need to solve the case.”

I gave her my best Hard Stare. It didn’t equal hers, but I didn’t want her to think that she could dominate me like she often dominated the conversation in the living room at Insurgents meeting.

“You’re not a member of Pentapuss,” I said, abruptly changing the subject.

“No, I’m not,” she replied.

“Did being left out make you angry?”

“I wasn’t left out.”

“Really?”

“They invited me to join when they formed it, but I didn’t choose to join. They said I could if I changed my mind, but I haven’t.” She shot me another penetrating stare. “You think I did it,” she accused. What a one-track mind!

“No, I don’t!” I said. “I haven’t proven anyone innocent yet, so I’m keeping an open mind about who might be guilty.”

“It’s not me, Frank,” she said, looking into my eyes.

I don’t believe that people can’t meet your eyes if they’re lying, or the myth that you can “read” the truth in someone’s eyes. Yet as every good card player on the Strip knows, people do have “tells,” unconscious

mannerisms that tip a lie.

Still, I defy anyone to look into that woman’s blazing eyes and feel her intensity and fail to believe what she said with such conviction. Karen was either innocent or one hell of an actress.

“I know you don’t think I’m much of a fan, because I don’t do fanzines,” she continued, “but I’ve been an Insurgent for close to two decades. I may not write a lot of fanzines, but I understand how Insurgents is like a family. I’ve always figured that what was said during the meetings is inside the family.”

“I see it that way, too,” I said.

“If I had a problem with what Cele did, I’d have discussed it with her at Insurgents, not tattled to the school board and not do it under a phony name.”

“I see that, Karen,” I said. She had been my leading suspect, but now Karen had built a pretty solid defense. “I think you could’ve sent Cele’s email to the school district if you thought it was justified, but if you did, you’d have put it under your own name instead of implicating Mark Carey.”

“Thanks for that, anyway,” she said. Maybe she expected a ringing endorsement, maybe she didn’t. Either way, this was the best I could do. That’s because I still had some doubts about Karen ricocheting around in my head like a castanet.

“You’re making sense and I’m listening to you,” I assured her. “So whom do *you* think did it?”

“I’ve been trying to decide since I got Steve’s letter,” she said. “I see plenty of reasons to suspect people, but not enough reasons to say that someone is guilty.”

“Sounds like you’ve made a few trips to my world,” I said, thinking about the hours I’d already spent sifting through the names. Every name looked possible, but none looked certain or even probable.

“Is that it?” Karen asked, suddenly snapping the conversation back into sharp focus. I told her I was done for now and thanked her for her cooperation.

I’d learned a lot and had some assumptions challenged. The interview with Karen wasn’t a spectacular success, but I’d learned some things and it could’ve gone much worse.

Thursday began pretty much like I’d expected. I

Chapter Eighteen

The Mobile Detective

started at about 7 am. I worked through the morning and afternoon at a blistering pace to cram two days of work into less than one.

Mostly I got done what I had to do, though a possibly unfaithful husband, whom I'll call "Fred," caught a break. He headed out to Red Rock and I had to make a choice between killing a day following him or picking up his trail tomorrow. If he had a honey up on the mountain, he could have his piece in peace today.

I'd catch up to him on Monday or Tuesday.

I hit the Jack in the Box drive-through about 1:30 and bought a bacon cheeseburger, fries and a Diet Coke. As I sat eating in my car, prudently parked in one of the lot's few shady spots, my cell rang.

"It's Mark," he said.

"How's it going?"

"I talked to Thelma Oliver," he said. "She's the Director of Community Relations for the school district. This is the woman I told you I was going to see."

"I remember," I said. "How did it go?"

"I did what you suggested and made the same kind of approach to her that I used on the Dean of Faculty."

"Did it work?" I wanted to know.

"Like a charm, Frank," he replied. "I called and couldn't get her. After a couple more tries, I gave up calling and I camped in her office waiting room until

she had to come out of her office. I intercepted her when she finally came out. I told her it was a matter of vital interest that could have grave consequences for the school districts relationship to the community."

"How'd she take that?"

"She hustled me into her office. I explained that I was trying to track down and stop an identity theft, definitely *not* anything to do with Cele Corbin. Then I told her I was afraid that if I had to go to the police to get access to the letter, it could get to the media and create a scandal."

"Nice."

"Oh, I laid it on thick," he assured me. "I painted the story the way TV news would do it and she became extremely eager to be helpful."

"That's good," I said. "Did you find out anything?"

"That's where things went in a weird direction," he said, with a laugh. It didn't sound like mirth.

"How so?"

"Everything was fine until she went to Dean Kerwood's office to see about Cele's email. When she came back, Ms. Oliver was tight-lipped, with an ass to match. She was visibly nervous. She said that Dean Kerwood denied the existence of any letter.

"And when Ms. Oliver checked the files..." I led.

"... they wouldn't let her actually consult the file,"

he finished the sentence in exactly the way I'd hoped he wouldn't.

"That has the stench of a cover-up.

"I think it's mostly Kerwood," Mark noted, "but I don't see Ms. Oliver getting into a confrontation with someone as powerful as the school district's Phyllis Kerwood."

"How did Oliver leave things with you?"

"Oliver apologized and wished me luck, but she didn't put much enthusiasm into it. Mostly, she just wanted to end an embarrassing scene."

"That means I have no way to get a copy of the email to send to Yahoo so they'll give me access to the bogus account or trace the offending letter."

"Don't lose heart, Mark. We had to try the school and Yahoo, but there are other ways to get at the truth."

"I'll write to Yahoo again tonight," he said. "I'll tell them that the school district claims they lost the actual letter. I'll give them several proofs of my identity and ask if they could still help me in some way.

"That's the right thing to do," I said. I did not add that it probably wouldn't accomplish much. The email to Yahoo was a necessity and telling Mark that it would probably be futile wasn't going to help get it written and sent.

I made sure Mark knew how truly grateful I was for his help. "Not panning out is something that happens to me every day," I consoled him. "If we keep working the case, it won't be long until something pops." Again, I thought it would be best to settle for that half-truth instead of referencing all those Unsolved Mysteries and Cold Cases. I didn't want to share my fear that maybe the case couldn't be resolved beyond a reasonable doubt.

I'd just left Spanish Trails, where I'd gone to collect a much-needed check from a satisfied client, when Marsha Carey's ring-tone kicked my cell into life.

My client, the soon-to-be-ex (and soon-to-be-rich) Ms. Destiny LaRocca Fleming, had greeted me in a purple silk robe that barely covered the silver mesh micro-kini. The see-through mesh did little to cover my client, who'd met her straying husband when she squatted down in front of him at a well-known gentlemen's club.

Since the Flemings didn't have a pool, at least at this location, I figured that she had given special thought to her attire for this meeting. I got a strong feeling that my client might be contemplating a celebration/consolation afternoon with her now-favorite detective.

Detective friends in other cities tell me that it's the same everywhere. There is a percentage of divorcing

female clients that wants to pay back their cheating husbands. The temperature outside had climbed into the 90's on a late-spring Vegas afternoon and, under other circumstances, I might possibly have taken her up on her unspoken, but blatant, offer.

As it was, I silently warned myself to stick to the case. I snatched the check from her elegantly manicured hand and hustled to the door, pleading another appointment. Maybe I'd have stayed, but probably not. Even with the case to obsess me, Donna had stayed on my mind, the memory refreshed every time the case invoked her name.

As for my client, I'm sure she put her outfit to good use in some other direction. At least, I hoped so. Such talent should not be wasted,

As I left the Spanish Trails area, one of the east-side's showier neighborhoods, my cell phone rang. This time, it was Marsha Carey. I let it go to voice mail. I don't talk on a cell phone while driving.

I do that as my contribution to Safe Driving. Unfortunately, I was so eager to find out what Marsha had to tell me that I flirted with a speeding ticket all the way back to my home.

I rushed to my den the minute I cleared the front door. I had the voice mail going before I'd even gotten settled into my office chair. Marsha's voice mail asked me to call back/

I wasted no time in doing so,

"I went through the attendance lists like you asked," Marsha said when she picked up the phone.

"Did you find anything?" I prompted.

"I checked the list for every meeting, starting with the one right after Cele sent the email about the three racist skinheads." So far, she hadn't told me anything I didn't already know, but this was her conversation. I let her steer it.

"I looked for *anyone* who changed their frequency," she said, continuing the unnecessary explanation.

"Did you find anything interesting, Marsha?" I said, because it's hard not to do some conversational backseat driving. I probably should've been more patient. On the other hand, as if to validate my tactic, she immediately hit me with the facts.

"Yes, I did," she said. "You know the results for the Insurgents who received both of those emails, but I turned up some information about three other Insurgents."

"That's amazing," I blurted. The attendance list check was a shot in the dark. Despite my hopes, I was still surprised that we'd actually hit anything.

"Who?"

"Mitch Sweeney, Bret Callison and Carolyn Pro-

fetti,” Marsha said.

“That’s great!” I said, trying to encourage her to get to the details.

“Mitch and Bret both missed the meeting right after Steve sent out the follow-up email. They attended the one after that and then both weren’t there for the one after *that*. Does that mean anything?”

I thought I knew the reasons for the absences and, if Marsha didn’t, it wasn’t my place to divulge their secrets. I’d check with Mitch and Bret if necessary, but I didn’t like to do that. I thought of a follow-up question that would, at the least, give a strong indication if my idea was right. “Could you check the attendance of Tina Callison and Margo Sweeney for that third meeting after Steve’s email?”

“Sure,” she said. “They didn’t go to that meeting, either, which is the way I remember it,” she told me. “That was a little smaller Insurgents meeting than usual, so it stuck in my mind that we were missing five regulars who would’ve made a big difference.”

“That’s what I thought,” I said. The Callisons and the Sweeneys were very close and they’d often gone away for weekends together. I’d have to check, but I figured that’s where they were instead of the meeting. I already knew where Mitch and Bret were the Saturday after Steve dropped his email bombshell. They’d already told me about their (wife-approved) jaunt to the brothel in Pahrump.

“I’ll find out why they weren’t at those meetings if I can, but what about the other Insurgent, Carolyn Proffetti?”

“Carolyn hasn’t been to an Insurgents meeting since the whole thing blew up,” she said. “I haven’t heard from her since then, either, though she usually sent me an email if she wasn’t going to get to the meeting.”

“She hasn’t contacted you in any way?” I said. “Do you know if anyone else has heard from her?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll ask around,” she promised. “The only thing is, Carolyn didn’t get either of the emails.”

“This doesn’t make her guilty,” I replied, “but she didn’t have to *get* the letter to *read* the letter.”

“That’s right,” she said. “She could’ve gotten a copy from one of the actual recipients.”

“Do you think she could be the one?” I asked.

“Carolyn is very hard to get to know,” Marsha commented. “I honestly don’t have much to do with her between meetings. Nothing against her, but she doesn’t invite closeness.”

“She’s even more stand-offish about men,” I ventured. I still had painful memories about hasty retreats from the living room during more than one of her “All

Men Are Bastards” monologues.

“She had some kind of an unhappy love affair about six months ago. It left her with a lot of hostility toward men,” Marsha explained.

“Did you notice anything about Carolyn that could relate to Cele or vice versa?” I pressed. “See any fights or tantrums?”

“I haven’t seen anything like that,” Marsha said. “In fact, Carolyn and Cele got fairly friendly during the winter, even though they did argue about the schools a lot.

“Are they still close” I wondered.

“I don’t know, Frank,” Marsha responded, “but I don’t think so. It’s so hard to tell anything with Carolyn.”

“She’s very controlled,” I agreed. “Very self-contained.”

“Yes, that’s it,” Marsha said. “It seemed like they stopped always sitting next to each other.”

“Did they fight?”

“No more than usual,” she judged. “They didn’t act as friendly towards each other as they previously did between debates.”

“Are you saying that their relationship pretty much got down to arguing?” I proposed.

“Yes, I guess I am,” she said, uncertain of her own conclusions.

“I’m hoping to talk to Carolyn, maybe even tonight,” I said. “Then maybe we’ll know more.”

“Is there anything else?” Marsha asked.

“As a matter of fact, there is,” I replied. Marsha always sent a meeting reminder to every Insurgent on the Thursday evening before a each Saturday meeting. I needed her to send an additional invitation to several members.

I gave her the short list of names and asked if she could get them to Insurgents about an hour early, 6:30, so I could meet with them about the case.

“That won’t be a problem,” she assured me after she wrote down the names.

We promised to see each other Saturday and clicked off the call

Chapter Nineteen

Following the Leads

I'd hardly put down the phone when I turned to the computer to check my email. There was still no response from Carolyn Profetti.

I logged onto Facebook. I'd received no new messages and none of the comments on my Wall came from Carolyn Profetti. I went to Carolyn's Wall. She had written something inconsequential on it a couple of hours earlier, but nothing pertained to the case, the Insurgents or even Fandom.

I pre-heated the oven and then started a frozen pizza. They're faster in the microwave, but I'd convinced myself that they were better in the oven. Sometimes the rising crust fell anyway, but life's a series of risks.

I was going to visit the Corbins after dinner, but it was still too early to think about anything beyond the pepperoni.

I called Mitch Sweeney while I waited for the pizza.

He clicked in on the second ring. After the appropriate amount of chitterchatter, I explained the reason for my call. He insisted on an update on my investigation.

Mitch, who'd gotten his information second-hand, actually knew very little about the case. Roughly half of his information was wrong in varying degrees. Once he'd heard my summary, he peppered me with questions.

"Now that you know everything," I said, pointedly, "I was wondering whether you have any observations about the case. For instance, did anyone do or say any-

thing that struck you as peculiar at the meeting after Cele got fired?"

"I wish I could help you, Frank," Mitch said, "but I wasn't at that meeting."

"You weren't?" I tried to give it a surprised inflection.

"No, that was the weekend that Bret and I went to that place we told you about," he reminded me. That confirmed my own memory.

"We went up there Saturday afternoon and came back about the same time on Sunday."

"That *was* that weekend," I said, letting light appear to dawn. "You missed another one around that time, too, didn't you?"

"Yes, two meetings after that," he answered. "That's when Margo and I and Bret and Tina went to California for the weekend. We went to one of those resorts with wild themed rooms. We swapped rooms so everyone got to enjoy two different themes."

He didn't say whether rooms were the only things swapped. I didn't ask him, because it wasn't relevant to the case and it wasn't any of my business.

"Well, sorry to have bothered you," I said. "I'm just fishing for information."

"It wasn't any bother," Mitch corrected. "See you at Insurgents on Saturday."

"See you then," I said as I clicked to end the call.

By the time I'd eaten the pizza, it was late enough to call the Corbins to see if we still were on for tonight. I dreaded the possibility of a last-minute bail-out, but I

knew I ought to give my friends the option. I got the green light from Steve, though he wouldn't guarantee how much Cele would tell me.

Cele was already seated on the couch when Steve led me into the living room. As he motioned me to the chair next to his wife, Steve said, "I'm going to work on a fan article while you talk. I think it might work better that way."

That was exactly what I wanted, but I hadn't figured out how to broach the request in a way that didn't scare Cele and bug Steve. He'd sprung me out of that tight corner, but it was better to accept my good fortune without comment. I certainly didn't want Steve or Cele to have second thoughts.

"How are things going?" I began. "Have you thought about what you're going to do professionally?"

"Honestly, Frank, I haven't decided," she said. "The original exoneration for the actual incident is a big help. I've got a private school offer and another to join a tutoring service."

"That's great," I responded. She'd need every advantage to emerge from this career-wrecker.

"I think I'll be all right," she said with less of her earlier glumness. Give her credit; Cele was as resilient as a Superball

The ice broken, I quickly gave Cele the short version of information I'd found since we'd last talked.

Well, most of it, anyway. I didn't tell her about Carolyn Profetti's recent disappearance. I figured she probably already knew about it.

"I know you're worried about DNQ's, but I really need to know who 'Maria Handel' is," I said. No way to sugar-coat it "It doesn't seem like any of the others in the Circle of Nine are good suspects."

"What about Karen McClain?"

"I thought she might be the guilty fan at first," I said, "but now I'd call her a long shot."

"What changed your mind?" she wanted to know. It was a reasonable question, one I'd have to answer directly, but diplomatically.

"Talking to her pretty much convinced me," I replied. "She either belongs on Broadway or else she's pretty riled up on your behalf."

"She is?" Cele asked, obviously pleased by this unexpected support.

"She thinks you were stupid to write that letter," I said. Cele made a face. "She praised what you did during the confrontation with the toughs."

"She'd like it even better if I'd drawn a gun and blasted all three of them."

"You're probably right," I conceded. It was good to hear Cele lighten up, but I couldn't let her lead me off the track. "She was also very eager to have the

culprit caught and expelled from the club and, if possible, all of Fandom."

"Looking back, sending that email was one of the dumbest things I've ever done in my life," Cele said.

"Like I said, I do understand why you haven't told me Maria Handel's name, but it's not fair to the other eight fans, people you think of as friends. Everyone's under a cloud until we find the one who did it."

"I know, I know," Cele said. "I still don't like this."

"It's not your fault," I assured Cele. "If she's the one, she shouldn't be allowed to hide her guilt behind a DNQ. This is about justice, not fannish customs."

"I hate this," she said through clenched teeth.

"If the person using 'Maria Handel' is not your tattler, I will do everything possible to keep her identity a secret."

"I appreciate that," she said. "My problem goes deeper than that. There are some things you may find out during your investigation that I don't want known by everyone. Frank, don't take this the wrong way, but I'm not crazy about **you** knowing them either."

"If it's something to do with the case, it would be a lot better if you'd tell me," I said. "If not, then I don't need to know those secrets."

"Maria Handel is Carolyn Profetti." The utter calm in her voice spoke louder than any gush of emotion. Having decided it was necessary, Cele had elected to rip off the bandage with one quick, painful tug.

"So she *did* have both emails," I said.

"That doesn't make her guilty," Cele said, in the last flicker of loyalty to a dying friendship.

"No, it doesn't," I conceded, "but it does make her a leading suspect."

"You'll talk to her gently, won't you?" Cele asked.

"Of course I will, if I can get hold of her," I said. "I've called and emailed Carolyn, but she hasn't responded. Have you heard from her at all?"

"No, I haven't," she admitted. "We aren't as close as we were any more."

"I'm sorry to pry, but do you know why?" I didn't like to press Cele like that, but it was vital. I had to know how strong Carolyn's motive might be.

"It's hard to say," Cele offered. "We didn't have a big blow-up or anything like that."

I decided to let that go without comment. "Well, if you hear from Carolyn, please explain to her that I need to talk to her."

"I will," she said, "but, Frank..."

"Yes?"

"Don't assume she's guilty," Cele pleaded.

"I don't assume that at all," I said. "There's no hard proof of anyone's guilt so far."

"Thanks."

Chapter Twenty

Fresh Clues

I left two different, short messages on Carolyn Profetti's voice mail, one at 11:30 and the other at 5:30 on Friday.

I spent the morning in Municipal Court, presenting evidence in a case involving the systematic theft of filet mignon from the meat department of a local supermarket. I figured it was open-and-shut, because of eyewitness testimony, including mine. Besides, stealing prime steak doesn't earn you a lot of sympathy.

They called me as a witness about 10:30. I testified for about 15 minutes, including the usual rigmarole, but I stayed until the trial went to the jury and they returned the expected "Guilty!" verdict.

I went back to my car a happy detective. Justice had triumphed – and the supermarket manager would think of me the next time his store had a similar problem, which was always.

When I got into the Hyundai, I immediately tried calling Carolyn Profetti. Again.

The woman had gone gafia, ceased all communication with any of the Vegrants. This attempt fated no better than my earlier tries. I left another voice mail.

I had a hunch she was screening calls. Ordinarily, I might've tried using my burner, which blocked "caller ID" on most phones. Then I would've pretended to be someone who could ask her questions and tease some info out of her.

That wouldn't work with the fans, even a relative neo like Carolyn, so I didn't even think of trying it.

People are almost never impressed by those whom they know well. If Carolyn heard my voice, she would recognize it and just disconnect. Once someone like

Carolyn refused to speak to me, it might expose me to charges of harassment if I continued to try and interview her.

That would have two very negative consequences, one for me and one for the case. The bad news for me could be anything from a humiliating session with the state examiners all the way to having my PI license lifted. The downside for the case is that, without contact with Carolyn, it might never be solved beyond a reasonable doubt.

No, I was going to play the percentages and make sure that if I did make contact, I'd be able to do what had to be done if she turned out to be the guilty party. Otherwise, she might hide behind a succession of TRO's (Temporary Restraining Orders) until we all just got tired and went away.

I was being careful almost as much for the sake of the traitor, whether Carolyn or not, as I was for myself. I still hoped to keep things out of the hands of the police. I thought I could make that work, as long as everyone involved was a fan and damage didn't include serious crime. If Carolyn did play the TRO gambit, the matter would land in the courts and that would mean a police investigation. Ironically, if Carolyn *was* the false friend, her move to stifle my investigation could well lead to her indictment!

My cell phone interrupted this rumination. It was Mark Carey, so I got set for a lot of angst and anguish. That wasn't his usual way, nor had it ever been over the decade since he and Steve Corbin had shepherded me through my neofan years.

He wasn't quite himself, I silently told myself. An attack on his honor as a fan and as a man had unnerved him. No matter how many told him, no matter how often they said there wasn't a shadow of a doubt about his innocence. Mark could only see a stain that he feared he could never eradicate.

"Hello, Frank, it's your favorite amateur detective!" Mark's cheerful, booming greeting nearly blew me out of my chair.

"Amateur detective?" I said, because I couldn't think of anything more clever.

"That's me, Fran," he said, feeling well enough to use the nickname he'd dropped on me. "There's good news tonight!"

"We could all use some of that," I observed.

"Fran, this is going to rock your world! The case isn't like we thought it was, not at all!" My nerves twanged with excitement; his galloping enthusiasm had me going, too.

"It started when I got to thinking about my brief meeting with Thelma Oliver, the community relations director. I thought about what you said when I told you about it."

"I'm glad if anything I said was helpful, Sherlock," I said. I felt I owed him that shot for his returning to the use of "Fran" as my name.

"I called her up and really poured out my heart to Phyllis," he explained. "I told her about the looming threat of identity theft and how I was worried for my wife and family."

"You and Marsha don't have any kids."

"No, we don't, but I didn't get too specific about the 'family' part," he responded. "If she'd pressed, I would've told her that I needed to be able to support my aging parents if anything happens to them."

"So you won her sympathy," I summarized, knowing that wouldn't stop Mark from some well-earned gloating.

"I persuaded her that I couldn't care less about the Cele Corbin Case. I let her know that I felt it had been fairly and fully judged by the learned Dons of the Clark County School District. I assured her that the last thing I wanted was to revive a closed case."

"Nice." It was a little heavy-handed, but subtlety doesn't always do the job.

"Then I started to acquaint Ms. Kerwood with the effects of identity theft. I told her we'd lose our home, our car, our savings, the nest egg for that college education."

"Who's going to college?" I couldn't resist.

"No one. Marsha and I already have degrees," he answered. "That nest egg is big enough for our higher education needs – or maybe a couple of burgers.

"I begged and pleaded until I could tell she was softening up. That's when I threw myself on her mercy."

"A-a-a-nd...?"

"She told me a little more of the truth," Mark said. "The letter may well be in the file, but she doesn't have authority to access it. She gave me the name of a campus cop she said could pull the letter and answer my questions."

"I drove over to School District Headquarters and found Sgt. Carl Tolliver. He was a nice guy, a little beefy and maybe 30. I explained the situation, he called Phyllis Kerwood and finally said that he could help me. He gave me his cell number and told me to call him in about an hour."

"When I called, Sgt. Tolliver was as friendly as before. He apologized, because he couldn't let me see the email, but he did agree to read me the header line by line."

"What did you get?"

"I found out a lot. Not everything we'd like to know, but plenty. The most important thing is that a junior college drop-out can successfully read the header of an email, where someone with a PhD couldn't."

"What do you mean?"

"When Sgt. Tolliver read the header to me over the phone, I checked it against my copy of Cele's letter."

"Did you find any suspicious changes?" It hadn't occurred to anyone that the email the school people received could have been edited to make it worse for Cele.

I didn't think the traitor had done that, but it was certainly a possibility. It was simply one more possibility than I wanted to tackle right then. Finding the perpetrator was the important thing. I couldn't do anything about the Cele Corbin Case, so the letter's content meant nearly nothing. I didn't like it, but that was reality.

"Mine and the school's were identical," he informed me.

"Cele sent the whole Circle of Nine the same email."

"I don't know if the text is the same. I couldn't ask the sergeant to read me whole letter. That would've spoiled my cover story about having no interest in the Corbin Case."

"Good point."

"Do you get it? The school's copy has the exact same header as my copy," he elaborated. "You see it, don't you, Fran? It's the *exact* same header."

I was stunned.

I don't know how else to put it. Everything I knew about the case was wrong. Or if not everything, then

enough things to make me regret the time and effort I'd wasted on several aspects of my investigation.

"So the mystery culprit handed Cele's letter to someone at the School Board or put it into someone's inbox. It wasn't forwarded at all!" I said louder than necessary. Shock can screw with your vocal volume control. "Someone printed it and handed it to someone in the office or, more likely, slipped it into Dean Kerwood's mailbox when no one was looking."

"And she gave it a bad reading and set Cele's firing in motion," he added.

"Right. Then, when I started nosing around, Dean Kerwood got scared. She may have realized that she had made a very bad decision about Cele, one that could rise up to bite her if the media got hold of it."

"So her desire to keep it quiet and her unintentional misreading of the header combined to set up a believable, but false chain of evidence," Mark wrapped up.

"Everything else aside, it means that no one stole your identity or used an account with your name for heavy crime. Someone has acted like a fakefan and a false friend, but it looks like there's no serious crime." Cele could probably sue the school, but I knew from our conversations that she had no taste for a long court battle.

"It's a relief, that's for sure," Mark admitted. I was happy the case hadn't developed that element. It might well make it easier to close the case without publicity and the police. "There's still one thing I don't understand, Mark. Why did Phyllis Kerwood tell Cele that you forwarded her letter to the school district?"

"I'd like to demonize her, because Kerwood's a pain in the ass, but I think it was probably unintentional stupidity," Mark replied. "She got my name, I think, because it was the only one on the 'To' line and the rest of the recipients were blind copied!"

"So, the only name was yours, as the recipient, and Cele's, as the sender?" I knew damn well that I should have checked one of the other copies of Cele's letter.

"That's it," he said with a dry, forced laugh born of exasperation, not amusement. "How's that for horrible?"

I didn't know how to put a positive spin on that piece of idiocy, so I didn't try. "We went on a wild goose chase, because a PhD couldn't read an email header!"

"A wild goose chase and a witch hunt." Mark said. "A wild goose hunt!"

He was getting giddy. "This doesn't put you totally in the clear," I said.

"I'm not the prime suspect," he said. "I'm just one of the nine people who might've given the school that email. I'm not a very likely suspect at all!"

"There's still the question of that Yahoo account with your name," I reminded him. "I wonder where it came from?"

"I didn't set it up and I have no idea who did," Mark said. "There might even be another 'Mark Carey'."

"Whatever its source, it's plain that it doesn't figure in the case," I judged.

"There was one difference between the two versions of the email. It doesn't exactly eliminate me as a suspect, but it almost does," Mark said. "The cop told me the email the school district got has a 'Yahoo' logo," he revealed, "so it's likely that it was printed out by someone who got Cele's email at a Yahoo email address."

"Someone could have received it at a non-Yahoo address and, through cutting and pasting, ported to a Yahoo address and then printed," I said, "but that would be a lot of trouble for no visible result."

"That's right, Fran," he agreed. "It's possible someone did that, but it sure isn't likely."

"Like you said, it doesn't clear your name, but it comes pretty close. If we can prove the Yahoo account we found is not yours, that would raise that to a virtual certainty."

"Right now, that looks pretty damn good to me," Mark said.

"Let's assume that the traitorous fan did everything the simple, straight-forward way. All that extra work wouldn't hide the source of the email any better than just printing it out."

"If we go with that assumption, doesn't that narrow the person who gave Cele's letter to the school district to someone who has a Yahoo email account?"

"Could you ask Marsha to check the Insurgents emailing list for me?" I could've asked Cele to check her online address book, but I wanted to keep her out of things as much as possible. She'd already suffered enough and didn't need to be reminded all the time.

"I'm sure she would. I'll only take a few minutes."

"Just ask her if she could have that for me when we get together before tomorrow night's meeting. That would be great," I said.

"You did a fantastic job, Mark," I said. It seemed a little strange for me to be the one with more experience, but I had that advantage as a detective, just like he did when it came to fannish matters. It felt good to be the guide and mentor for a change.

"Thanks, Fran," he said. "That means a lot."

"You've helped me many times, Mark. I'm glad I could do something to help you."

We swapped a couple of social formulas and hung up.

Chapter Twenty-one

The Insurgents Gather

You don't want to know about my Saturday. It's not that it was harrowing, tension-filled or outright scary. What it was, and is every week, is dull.

It's the day when I do the less-than-thrilling stuff that keeps me alive from week to week: laundry, super-market, drug store and house straightening all take time. Saturday is usually when I have the hours to spend.

I don't like to get up much before noon on Saturday. I surrender to hedonistic laziness and catch up on the many hours of rest I don't get during the week. Even though I'm a detective, I don't want to shuffle around looking like Peter Falk in his final year as Lt. Columbo.

Besides, Saturday often turned into a long day. The biweekly Insurgents meetings usually don't break up until 2 AM and I've dead-ended with the Careys and a few other late-stayers fairly often.

Planning to do something after an Insurgents meeting, unless it's a late-night drink or a late-night booty call, is almost impossible. Scheduling something for before the meeting is tricky, but it can be done, even at the Careys.

The problem is that Insurgents is so informal and unstructured that its 7:30 "start time" is an advisory, not a rule. The Insurgents don't have written rules. There's an oral one, something about it being an informal, invitation Core Fandom fan club that meets on alternate Saturdays, but I think Mark and Steve say it differently each time someone asks.

I'd asked Marsha Carey to invite the people I needed to see to get there about 6:30. Fans would start arriving about 7, but that would give me enough time to hold the short meeting.

I eased my Hyundai up the Careys' driveway and put it next to their car, a little off to one side. Parking

always presented a problem on Insurgents Saturdays. We could squeeze three or four vehicles onto the driveway and another couple at the low curb in front of the single-story home.

That still usually left several cars looking for a spot. Mark and Marsha said they always behaved with extreme tolerance toward whatever their neighbors did, short of gun battles. That way, Mark explained one night, the block's other residents felt inclined to overlook the extra cars in front of *their* houses a couple of evenings a month.

Marsha Carey met me at the door in response to my knock at 6:30.

"Most of them are here, waiting in the den," she said.

"Who's here?"

"Besides Mark and me, Steve and Cele, Gregg Messinger, Let's see... Donna and Naomi are here. We're waiting for Dan and Karen." She didn't have to tell me that the meeting would not include the Gottliebs. They were peripheral to the whole case, anyway, so it wasn't an important omission. I'd give a telephone update, if it came to that.

There was one other member whose presence, or absence, would be highly significant. "What about Carolyn Profetti?" I asked out of forlorn and feeble hope.

"No," Marsha said. "I somehow doubt we'll see much more of her."

"It's looking more and more like you're right," I said. "The longer she stays away, the more likely that it'll become permanent;"

By the time everyone gave their "hello's, Dan Poland had slipped into the room and taken one of the folding chairs. I'd already given my watch a couple of apprehensive glances when Karen pranced in with a great flourish, an attention-getting 10 minutes late.

I'd allowed for her ego when I set the start-time for this special little session. I have to admit that I was wrong about Karen, though. I'd figured she'd get there 20 minutes late and she made it in 15. Her curiosity must be working overtime, too.

I'm proud to say that I did *not* start by saying, "You're probably wondering why I called you here today." Repeating that worn catchphrase was a pretty small joke in any event, especially an unfunny one like this. On top of that, I had the knowledgeable fans bias against readymade, recycled humor. I had to laugh at myself for that one. At least two people, Cele and the tattler, would come out of this with their lives radically altered for the worse, but at least we're observing the fannish niceties.

I actually started by thanking everyone for coming so promptly, with only the slightest trace of sarcasm and then launched into a comprehensive update on the Cele Corbin Case.

There were audible gasps at several points during my narrative. In hanging close to every twist and turn, I'd forgotten how much the entire case had changed since I started my investigation about 10 days ago.

Hearing myself review the facts even gave me a few jolts. Those who thought they knew all about the situation as recently as even three or four days ago had to rebuild their conception from ground-zero. I saw some stunned faces looking at me from those gathered in the den.

"Marsha, were you able to look up those email addresses for me?" I asked after I'd finished telling the tale. They all had questions, but I didn't want to go down that road. We had a limited time and a lot to do.

"Yes, I did, Frank."

"Can you read off the names for us?"

"Sure" she said as she scanned the paper in her hand. "Naomi, Donna, Karen, Dan and that Maria Handel. No one else received Cele's letter at a Yahoo account."

"As I explained, the copy of the letter that the school district got has a 'Yahoo' logo on it. The original letter didn't have the logo, because the Corbins get their email at Cox.net. It got added to the letter when the person who narked on Cele printed it."

"But Frank," Naomi asked, "someone might have received the letter on a non-Yahoo account and then transferred it to a Yahoo account before making the print-out."

"That's unlikely!" Gregg blurted before I could say more-or-less the same thing.

"I agree," I responded. I wasn't going to veer from the menu to shut him up, either: "It would be a lot of work and I can't see why anyone would bother. Re-

member, it turned out that there was no attempt to impersonate Mark."

Several Insurgents nodded or made assenting noises.

"So it's likely that one of the names Marsha read—Donna, Karen, Naomi and this 'Maria Handel'—printed Cele's confidential email and took it to the Clark Count School District headquarters, where it was conveyed to Dean Phyllis Kerwood, who screwed up royalty and fired our Cele."

"They should've given her a medal." Gregg muttered. I let it pass without comment.

Besides, he was right. Cele should have gotten a salute, not an express ticket to the unemployment line. They punished her for admitting that she had conflicting thoughts instead of praising her actions.

"You've got all the significant details," I told them. "I want to know whom you think did it. I'll ask you why, but it's ok if it's a hunch or a feeling. Just say what you think. Ok?" I looked around the room and saw that everyone, even Gregg, was taking my request seriously.

I went around the room, letting each Insurgent choose his or her top suspect. Some of them had reasons, others just had feelings.

Most chose Maria Handel, which is what I expected. I discounted those picks, unless the person had a solid reason. Fans would tend to distrust the one unknown name in the Circle of Nine. Some would find it a lot easier to suspect a stranger.

Almost everyone mentioned Carolyn Profetti, but dismissed her, because they "knew" (because I had not shared the information with them) she hadn't gotten Cele's letter.

"I will wrap up the case tomorrow," I announced confidently. A diet of Sherlock Holmes mysteries have conditioned people, even fans, to expect Detectives to display bravado when they herald an impending solution. I didn't want to disappoint them.

My statement ignited an eruption of questions from every corner of the room. Cutting through the babble, the common theme was: who did it.

"I'm not ready to accuse anyone until I check on a few things," I said, reducing the gabble of voices to a manageable muttering. "All I can say now is that we've pretty conclusively proven that Mark's part, his only part, in this was that Cele and Steve sent him emails and nothing more.

"I'm also convinced that the fake fan and rotten friend who did this to Cele is not in this room, so you can all relax," I continued. "I can't answer any questions, but I promise to call each of you and tell you how it ended once it's done."

“You aren’t going to call in the police, are you?” Donna asked.

“Cele has every legal right to sue the culprit. She doesn’t intend to do that, though, unless you’ve changed your mind?” I looked at her and she shook her head.

“I plan to end it without the cops. That’s the fan-nish way, isn’t it?” My rhetorical question drew murmured agreement.

I heard the doorbell and then voices in the house. I took that as my cue to thank everyone and release them for the meeting.

Chapter Twenty-two

The Showdown

The Insurgents meeting broke up earlier than usual. Everyone was ready to go home at midnight, including me. Stress and tension can sap anyone’s energy. The meeting had more than its share of tense, stressed-out fans.

Their instinct was to cling together, like family, for mutual support at a troubled time. Except that in *this* Troubled Time, freeform suspicion and paranoia made closeness awkward.

I’d told the Insurgents that the traitorous fan was not at the Careys’ den, but that didn’t stop the speculation and sidelong glances. Only identifying Cele’s secret enemy would do that. I was determined to make that happen as quickly as I’d promised Saturday night.

Leaving Insurgents at midnight had the advantage of getting me up, dressed and ready to sleuth by 10:30. I intended to corner Carolyn Profetti.

So far, it had proven easier said than done, but today would be different. That’s because I had the benefit of excellent advice, the same advice that I gave Mark about approaching the school officials.

I didn’t even try another phone call or text message. I got in my car and cruised over to the Northwest

part of Vegas to the address Cele had given me a few days earlier.

When I pulled up to the two-story house, I saw Carolyn’s empty black Toyota in the driveway. I’d gotten there before she could leave the house, so I settled in to wait for her to open her front door or come around the left side of the house on the cement path that, presumably, led to the back door.

About 11:30, I saw the front door open. I immediately flung open the car door, heard the thud of it slamming shut behind me and walked rapidly up the front path.

She was still half-backing out the door, readying the key to lock it behind her. She jumped about six inches and whirled around when I said, “Good morning, Carolyn! I need to see you.”

“I don’t need to see you, Frank,” she said as she began an uncoordinated effort to unlock the door she had just locked.

“I think you do,” I told her, “The news is out, Carolyn. I’m here to help you. I’m trying to save you from a jail stretch and maybe a civil suit.”

That got her attention. She stopped fiddling with

the lock and turned to face me. She pressed back against the still-closed door, her green eyes shooting menacing sparks at me.

“What the hell are you talking about?” she demanded.

“You can’t bullshit me,” I warned. Then I abruptly changed to a sweeter tune. “I promise I only want to talk. Can’t we go inside and make this a little less public?”

She stood still, sizing up the situation. Finally, she shrugged and turned back to the door to unlock it. “Oh, all right. Come into the living room,” she said without turning back.

I followed her inside. She pointed to a chair and I sat down. She took the loveseat that met the chair at a right angle.

“Carolyn, I want to help you,” I began once we’d settled into our seats. “I’ve been investigating what happened to Cele Corbin.”

She composed her face into an impassive mask at the mere mention of Cele’s name, a pretty good indication that I had the right person. “I’ve taken things about as far as I can on my own. Either we wrap it up here, today, or it becomes a matter for the police.

“The police have the necessary authority to get the evidence I can’t, the evidence that proves you gave Cele’s letter that got her fired to the school.”

“Did what to Cele Corbin?” Carolyn said. She would’ve denied knowing Cele if she thought she could get away with it.

“Drop the innocent pose, Carolyn. It’s only going to get in the way. We have to talk directly and honestly. Otherwise, you’re going to come out of this a lot worse than you have to,” I said, trying to shake her stubborn defense. “We both know that’s exactly what you did, so let’s cut the crap.”

I gave her my best Hardboiled Stare. “You have two choices,” I stated.

“It’s always nice to have a choice,” she said, bitterly.

“These aren’t very nice choices,” I replied. “Sometimes, you’re in a lose-lose situation.”

“Why should I choose either?” she retorted.

“You’ll choose, because otherwise I’ll have to choose for you. You’ll choose, because one option is a lot worse for you than the other,” I said.” The first choice is that you can continue the dumb denials and turn down my offer. That would leave me no choice except to bring in the police. They’ll prove that you submitted the letter that got Cele fired.

“Since it was done with malicious intent, you are liable for felony prosecution and a civil suit. The best-case scenario is that you beat the felony rap and lose

the civil case. You’ll spend the rest of your life working to enrich Cele Corbin – and everyone in Fandom will *still* know what you did to her.” I could see that at least some of what I said had gotten to her.

“The other choice is for you to confess. That will end the investigation, so the police won’t get the case. I will tell Cele Corbin who gave the school her email.

“Part of this deal is that you’ll have to gafiate, but you’ll be able to go forward with the rest of your life. The confession will stay in my files unless you try to return to Fandom.” Fandom has forgiven a lot worse, but I wanted to keep things stark and simple. This wasn’t the time to point out a possible rainbow lurking behind the thunderheads.

“I want you to understand why I’m doing this for you, so that you know that I will absolutely keep every promise I’m making to you.” I didn’t mention the other part, that I would absolutely call in the cops if she pushed me. I didn’t have to tell her; Carolyn could see it in my face.

She was still sitting there, trying to look unruffled. That would have been more believable if her lower lip wasn’t trembling slightly and a tear hadn’t leaked from her left eye and slid down her cheek like a droplet on a window during a rain storm.

“I strongly believe that matters involving fans should be settled within Fandom, if possible, rather than turning to the Mundane Authorities. You violated the fannish code, but even Cele is willing to let you go in exchange for putting a definite end to the witch hunt *you* caused.

“If you’ll record a confession, this whole business ends here and you go free. If you don’t accept the deal, I will see that you are proven guilty and suffer the consequences, both in and out of Fandom. Believe me, Carolyn, when I tell you that no fan will give you the time of day if this gets out, so you’d be forced to gafiate anyway.” She’d dropped the pose of indifference and was weighing the possibilities. “

“Well, Carolyn, which way do you want to go?” Her facade eroded a little more under my steady gaze. The folks at Insurgents would’ve been surprised to see Carolyn brushing aside a rivulet of tears. I strongly doubt any of them had ever seen her cry.

“I d-didn’t m-mean for it to go like this,” she said.

“Maybe you didn’t, Carolyn, but they did go like that,” I told her. “The only thing you can do now is pick how you’re going to take the blowback.”

“I n-need some time to think,” she proposed.

I shook my head. “Time’s up, Carolyn. You could’ve come forward any time before this and maybe gotten a better deal, but we’re down to these two choices and time on them is running out.”

“Why d-do you have to be such a b-bastard?” she demanded.

“Can the self-pity, Carolyn,” I replied sharply. “You dug yourself into this hole by being a bad friend and a bad fan. I’m offering you a way you can cut your losses.

“It’s a limited-time offer,” I emphasized. “It expires about 10 seconds from now. What will it be?” Yes, I was being hard on her, but she’d been hard on Cele and everyone else. I didn’t let myself act on the pity I felt for her.

“Okay, okay,” she said with a wave of resignation. “Will Cele see the confession?”

“Not unless you want her to.”

“I don’t.”

“Then she won’t,” I agreed. “I’ll tell her you admitted it and apologized for all the trouble, but not that I’m holding positive proof.”

“I don’t want anyone to hear any confession.”

“If I’m not going to play it for Cele, I certainly wouldn’t play it for anyone else.” It was hard not to say more, because her stalling was getting on my nerves. But I knew cutting remarks wouldn’t get me closer to the goal, so I sacrificed the immediate pleasure of telling Carolyn what I thought of her in favor of potential long-range benefits.

“Do you want me to write it out or what?” Carolyn asked. Now that she had capitulated, she’d reined in her emotions, but she seemed totally resigned to what she had to do.

“We’ll record it,” I said, pulling my digital recorder out and putting it on the coffee table.

I spoke the obligatory preamble into the tiny device. “This is the confession of Carolyn Profetti, given to Frank Blaine on June 14, 2010. State your name and say what you did. We’ll then go into the circumstances and any mitigation you want to suggest.”

“I am Carolyn Profetti,” she said and paused, still reluctant to cross the line. After some throat clearing, she continued. “I received an email letter from Cele Corbin that I gave to Dean Phyllis Kerwood of the Clark County School District.”

“What happened as a result?” I asked.

“The school district fired her from her regular teaching job and a second one she’d gotten through the school district,” Carolyn answered. “I didn’t mean for things to go that far.”

“Now, Carolyn, how did this start?” I said. “The two of you argued a lot, but weren’t you and Cele friends?”

“We discussed,” she leaned on the word, “a lot of things during Insurgents meetings, but we were very close.”

“Very close?”

“Sometimes we partied,” she said and dropped her gaze.

“What does that mean? Please be more specific.” A vague confession would be better than none at all.

“Cele and I spent about an evening a week doing girlie things, talking and drinking. One night, she came over, because Steve was in Los Angeles, attending a business management conference. We sat around and talked, listened to music and got pretty drunk on Cosmos, like on *Sex and the City*.”

“And...”

“Cele introduced me to marijuana and I introduced her to lesbian sex,” said Carolyn. “We talked about it the next morning and she liked it, so we did it again.”

“And yet you turned on her. How did that happen?”

“I felt she turned on me,” Carolyn insisted. “When the incident happened and Cele sent out that email...” her speech slowed as she tried to decide how much to tell me.

“I figured out that you’re Maria Handel, if that helps,” I said.

“Yes, I received the letter as ‘Maria Handel,’” she admitted. “Cele called me right after she got fired. I commiserated with her on the phone for about an hour and she asked me to come over to her place.

“We started talking and she broke down completely. I tried to soothe her and I held her in my arms. Then I led her to the bedroom.

“Afterwards, Cele went to take a shower and asked if I would read part of a letter she planned to send out later. She hadn’t actually gotten very far, so I went through it in a couple of minutes.”

“What did you do then?”

“I saw that Cele had an open PDF labeled ‘Pentapuss,’” she said. “Cele had told me about the existence of this Pentapuss thing. She said she wasn’t supposed to tell me, but they were talking about making me a member. So when I saw the open file I looked at it even though I knew I wasn’t supposed to.

“You know what they say about eavesdroppers? It’s the same for reading someone’s files or at least it was in my case.”

“What do you mean, Carolyn?”

“The first thing that caught my eye was my own name. I scanned to the top of the paragraph and found Cele’s name, followed by a colon.

“I read it and it hurt me very much. I had just made passionate love to her and she wrote that I was distant, self-centered and a bit of a crank on more than one subject.”

“Carolyn, I hate to tell you this, but that was most likely a comment written *to* Cele not *by* her,” I said.

Had all of this issued from a neofan's lack of knowledge about amateur press associations?

"It had her name." Carolyn said. The color drained from her face.

"Apa members often set up comments to other members like that," I amplified. "They head each comment with the name of the intended recipient, followed by a colon."

Carolyn groaned, softly, constantly, as she hugged herself and swayed slightly. "Carolyn, we're almost done," I said. "I know it's hard, but we need to finish this and then you will never be troubled by it again."

"A big part of my life is gone and you tell me that it's because I didn't know what I was reading and you think I'm going to forget that?" her voice rose toward hysteria.

"It's a bad break, that's for sure," I said. "I didn't mean to trivialize it. What did you do after you read what you read?"

"I waited until she came out of the shower, made an excuse and went home. Later that day, after dinner, Cele's letter arrived in the 'Maria Handel' email inbox."

"What did you think of the letter when you read it?"

"She sounded very confused and conflicted in the email," Carolyn said. "It showed what happens when liberals like Cele get control of the schools." I didn't see how that last connected to the actual situation, but I let it pass. Challenging her on something like this would only distract her.

"When did you decide to give the letter to the school?"

"It was after Cele called me a few days after the incident and her email."

"What did she say?"

"She said how much she was suffering as a result of the school incident. She'd been suspended, pending the findings of the inquiry, and she dreaded a long fight to clear her name."

"Why did that upset you?"

"It didn't. She sounded a little better than she had when I visited," Carolyn contradicted me. "What got me is that she said we weren't going to, well, play, any more, just be friends."

"Did she explain her decision?"

"She was cold, like how I felt didn't matter. Like I didn't matter."

I had to let her vent a little. That was a given. Still, I couldn't let her ramble into one digression after another. "I can see that," I told her, "but can you recall what Cele actually said?"

"I'll never forget, or forgive that conversation. Cele

said she needed to get her life in order, that she needed to clear the air between her and Steve if she expected him to stand by her in a situation like this."

"Did you argue with her?"

"It's pretty hard to argue when someone says they don't want to m-make love with y-you any more," Carolyn said, her voice unexpectedly cracking a little. This woman was in pain, but I couldn't afford to let her off the hook.

"So you got dumped and then, when you reread the letter it seemed worse, right?" I pressed.

"Not exactly. I did re-read her letter and it bothered me even more than when I read it the first time," she recalled. "I didn't do anything until I got a call from Cele gloating about getting reinstated."

"So what did you do?"

"I re-read Cele's letter a third time and I saw how she was on the edge of violence, nearly out of control," Carolyn said. "I thought if I gave the school people her email, they'd see that and maybe order some counseling or something like that."

"But Cele was your friend and her email was sent to you as a friend, as a private, confidential communication," I challenged her before I could stop myself from injecting some reality into Carolyn's comfortable rationalizations.

"Some friend!" Carolyn complained. "She used me like a sex toy, like a whore, and then kicked me to the curb the first time it was a little inconvenient!"

"I wanted to give her a taste of the pain she'd given me. Another suspension or some counseling felt like a good way to take Cele Corbin down a peg."

"So you printed the email and took the hardcopy to the school district headquarters?"

"I got there early one morning, before Dean Kerwood got to her office, and slipped it into her inbox."

"And how did you feel when you got Steve's follow-up email?"

"I couldn't believe the school district had fired her," Carolyn said. "Suddenly, I realized that it had all gone much, much further than I thought it would."

"I knew I could never get Cele back as a friend, much less as the kind of friends we'd been. I couldn't even face her after she lost those two jobs."

"Is that why you stopped going to Insurgents meetings?"

"Yes, I just couldn't put myself in that situation," she said. "I didn't attend anything after I got Steve's email."

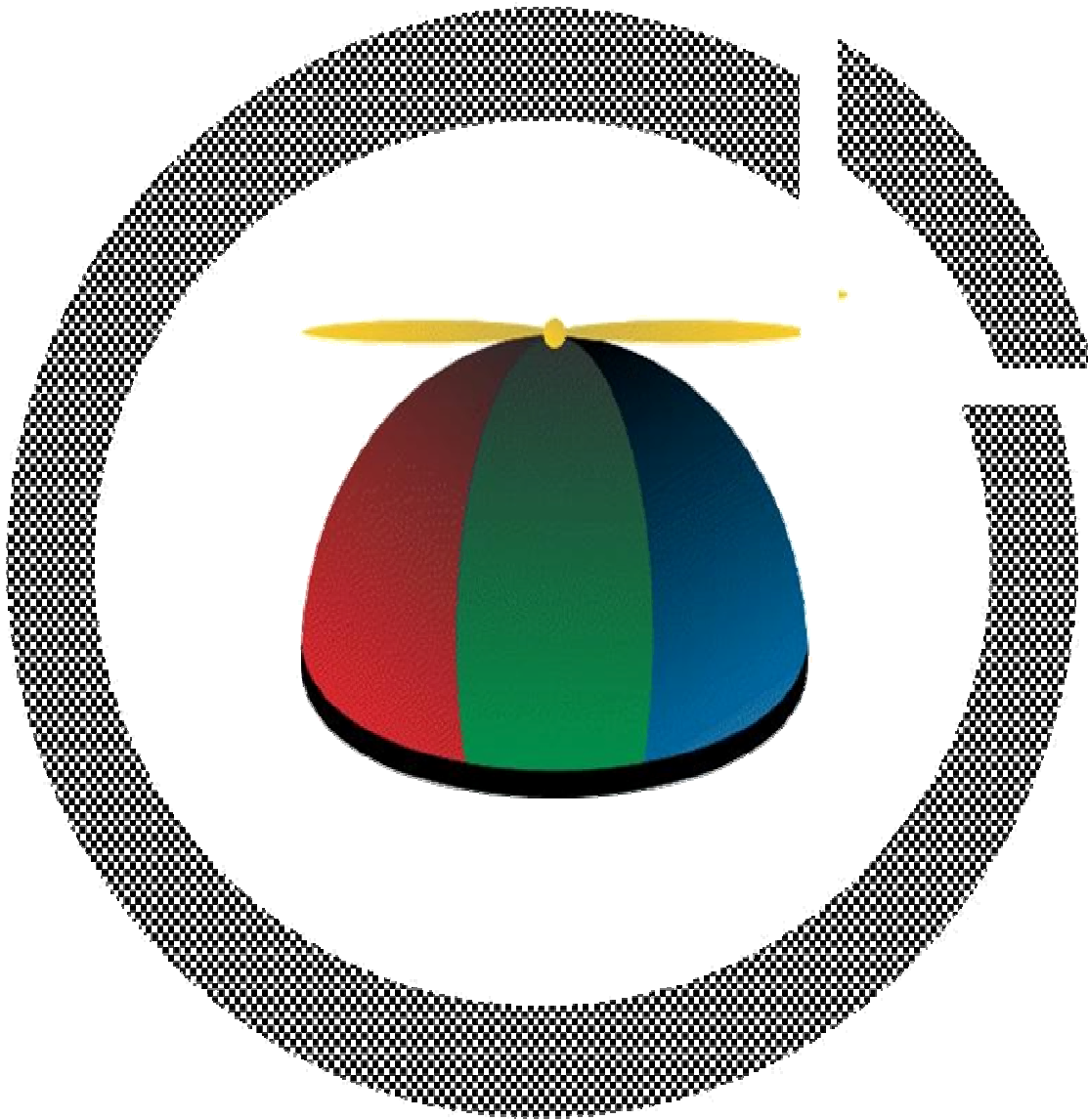
Fighting train-wreck syndrome, I made a big production out of shutting off the recorder and then testing to see if I'd gotten everything. I had.

"Thank you for the cooperation, Carolyn," I said.

“Just stay away from Fandom and no one will ever hear this.”

She said nothing, just sat there.

I got up, went to the door and left the ex-fan crying in her living room.



Epilogue

The Aftermath

I left Carolyn Profetti sitting there weeping, and I didn't look back, not even once. I wished her well and all of those comfortable platitudes, but I would be delighted to never see her, or hear of her, again.

She had cost Cele her job and, perhaps, her teaching career, but every Insurgent had paid something. Wildfire suspicion, paranoia and distrust are not the recipe for a happy club and The Fractured Circle Case produced a generous supply of all three.

After I left Carolyn Profetti, I drove directly to the Corbins' home to deliver my news in person.

As I told her an edited version of the wind up, Cele alternated between joy that we'd found the traitor and ended the case, and tears over the sad story of Carolyn Profetti.

I made a point of not telling them about the recording, which I eventually transferred to my desktop computer and then to a couple of disks. I didn't know what Cele had told, or not told, Steve, so I didn't want Carolyn to sow dissension on her way out of Fandom.

I called the others the next evening. I gave them the same information I'd told the Corbins. No one seemed surprised that Carolyn had turned out to be the unwor-

thy friend and fan, and no one crowed over catching the culprit. It was a miserable business and it left a grimy stain.

About a week after that, Donna Carlington told Henry Greenberg that it wasn't working. She's in process of moving in with me. We'll see how that goes. I guess I'm ready for something long-term, after all.

Someone told me that Carolyn Profetti is now haunting the meet-up circuit. I wish her well as long as she doesn't return to Fandom.

The Insurgents still meet every other Saturday. The next couple of meetings after Carolyn's confession were all right, but a spark had temporarily gone out of the club. Fannish spirits won out over bad memories, eventually, and things have gradually eased back into a good scene.

Jennifer and Cele got their husbands to sit down for a dinner recently. I think the Gottliebs will be rejoining the Insurgents fairly soon.

Now I've written my account. Maybe now I can get back to some good old, healthy fanac.

-- Frank Blaine

FRIEND or FOE?

CELE COROBIN survived one trauma,
a fan's treachery could ruin her life!

MARK CAREY is on the griddle,
must prove his innocence!

Frank Blaine is the Trufan Detective
and only he can heal the circle!

The Fractured Circle



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