

# BLOWN CHANCES



a Cooper Wright Mystery  
by Rob Steele

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Maybe I am getting old, but I think that television was better back in my day. Limited cable with about 20 channels. Networks had to be more picky and put out higher quality programs. Now, 5000 channels with millions of shows that are utter crap. Then “reality” tv came along and made things worse. Reality tv used to be the news, maybe sports or a game show. Now, it’s hateful people and no script trying to escape an island or live in a house together? Or worse, hateful people and it *is* scripted. I suspect a lot of them are. That’s what real life is. Television is supposed to be an escape from that, or at least, it was.

I bring this up for a reason. I've been called to the set of “Pimped Survivors of My Real World Brother's House Renovation”... or whatever. I wrote it down so I’d remember but the name of the show isn’t really important. What is, is that one of the contestants filed attempted murder charges against the show’s director this morning, then discovered that there really was a murder of another contestant. I know there’s probably some fabulous prize for winning, but nothing is worth killing someone else for. Even ratings.

I arrive at a house on the outskirts of the city limits. Out here, it’s mostly just... well, it looks like it could have been dunes if it were sand, but it’s all grassy. Not really fields, not really hills. I’m sure there’s a name for it; I just don’t know what it is. But situated in the middle of a clump of grassy dunes is a small road leading to a fairly substantial house. Just in glancing at it, I’d say about six bedrooms with lots of amenities. As I arrive, I notice Officer Scott Walker and several other officers and CSIs already at the scene. Walker’s in charge and issuing orders to everyone, making sure they’re where they should be and doing what they should be doing. He’s very efficient that way. “Well, Scott, what’ve ya got?” Oh damn. That rhymes.

Officer Walker turns and notices my approach. He tries to meet me halfway but stumbles over a large cable leading from a number of cameras to a van with the show logo on the side and mutters a few choice but not network airable words. “Lieutenant, we’ve got the scene pretty much locked down.

We've got everyone cordoned by the broadcast truck and, yes, there are officers over there making sure no one is talking to each other about anything, especially what happened."

"Well," I reply, "I didn't get a whole lot of a briefing on what happened. What have you figured out so far?"

Officer Walker pulls out his notepad and flips a couple pages and takes a deep breath before starting. "What I've got is, the season finale of 'This Old Home (In)Stead'... that looks good in writing," he says thumbing toward the logo on the side of the truck where the "IN" is in parenthesis, "but doesn't really roll off the tongue. Anyway, they're down to four contestants: Shannon Chandler, Bill Pronger, Michael White, and the favorite to win it all, Neil Lee.

"Mr. Lee is the one who filed charges this morning. Since the house is almost done, he was one of the two who were supposed to use a power washer to clean the outside of the house. Whoever cleaned the most won the challenge and got bonus points, or something. It was supposed to be Mr. Lee and Michael White, but somehow signals got crossed and Ms. Chandler was doing it. But when Mr. Lee plugged in the power washer, the socket exploded." We enter the house through the garage and the power washer is on the floor near a burnt-out socket. The cord looks like it exploded from the inside and there's dark scoring marks leading from the socket, up the wall, across the ceiling, and to the fuse box, which also has a lot of scorch marks and is missing its door.

"I was working on the set as extra security, so when Mr. Lee called on the original charge of attempted murder, I just went from security guard to actual on-duty," Officer Walker continued. "He was explaining to me about how the electrical system had been tampered with and that just about anything would blow the system, when I think he realized that Ms. Chandler was on the other side of the house. He took off running and I followed and, sure enough, we found Ms. Chandler about fifty feet from the house. The electrical socket blown there too. She was a small thing and it just nailed her. Mr. Lee started CPR and I called in an ambulance. Mr. Lee's an EMT so he just kept doing CPR when the paramedics arrived and went with them, but she died on the way there. Mr. Lee is at the hospital getting checked

out. He got a shock too but not as bad as she did.”

“That means we’re looking for someone who knows how to rewire a fuse box and had motive,” I conclude. “That means the other contestants for motive, and I want to talk to the producer and host of the show. Do you watch this one?” Officer Walker shook his head and shrugged. “Yeah, me neither. Find someone who knows about electrical systems and have this all looked at. I’m going to start talking with our witnesses. Send in the contestants.” Officer Walker left the garage to make some calls and sent in Bill Pronger and Michael White. The former wore tattered overalls and work boots, the later wore an almost pristine white suit with a blue pastel shirt. They looked like John-boy from *The Waltons* and Tubbs from *Miami Vice* – not exactly a match.

“Pleasure to meet you Lieutenant,” drawled Mr. Pronger, his accent matching his attire. “Just wish it were under more pleasant circumstances.” It’s rare for me to come across such an eye-poppingly, and, frankly, annoying accent, but I regain my composure and look to Mr. White.

“Is that real?” I ask, pointing to Mr. Pronger indicating his accent.

“He's like that 24-hours a day, seven days a week. You should hear him snore in that accent. Positively dreadful,” he replied, his pompous accent almost as thick. This interview should be fun. I mention that Mr. White doesn’t look the sort to rebuild a house. He chuckled at the idea. “No one wanted me to be here, least of all me. I’ve even tried to get voted out of the house, but I’m here on a community service court order. The judge thought it would be good for me to see how the other half lives. Now that I know,” he says, looking disdainfully at Mr. Pronger, “I’ll be more careful in my embez... ahem, business activities.”

“Well, that explains it,” drawled Mr. Pronger, looking equally disgusted at Mr. Smith. “I knew you was a no good from the moment you first set foot in this house.” He returned his gaze to me. “He’s done some horrible things, Lieutenant, and I was wonderin’ why no one voted him outta here by now. I shoulda known this contest was rigged.”

“Is it?” I ask, hoping to get something more on our victims.

“All I know is that I’m allowed to win,” replied Mr. Smith, accent dripping with snobbery. “I had to suffer this entire season with sawdust and hammers and those wretched poor people constantly telling me what to do.”

“Well, that’s something I suppose,” inserted Mr. Pronger, who perked up slightly. “Hang on a minute. If he can’t win, and Mr. Lee gone and poor Ms. Chandler dead... does that mean I win?” He momentarily looked ecstatic, then he just as instantly deflated. “I just made myself a suspect, didn’t I?”

“Oh well done, Billy Bob!” laughed Mr. Smith. “Arrest him now and then I can win by default and this whole dreadful mess will actually be for something!”

I rub the bridge of my nose with my thumb and forefinger. I momentarily consider shooting them both, but I don’t. Gun owners have to be responsible – so do police officers. I ask a few more questions, getting useless answers and dismiss the pair, having them return to the broadcast van. I ask them to send the director, Lindsay Davies, and the host, David Waters, in. During the interim, Officer Walker returns to tell me that Darryl Silverstone, our resident techie, is on his way in to inspect the electrical system, and he asks to watch the interrogation. I see no reason not to let him.

The pair enter the garage and I’m a bit taken aback. I was expecting Lindsay to be a woman for some reason. I’m wrong. And if the other pair of suspects were John-boy and Tubbs, this was Herb Tarlek from *WKRP in Cincinnati* and, hang on a minute. “Isn’t that that guy from that movie everyone hated?” I whisper to Officer Walker, who just shrugs and nods an ‘I think so.’

“Gentlemen,” I begin, “I need to know about what happened this morning.” Mr. Waters regales us the same story as I have it and I realize why no one liked that movie, although it is bothering me that I can remember details about Herb from *WKRP* but this movie title is completely gone. “What I meant was, did anyone on the set have it in for Mr. Lee or Ms. Chandler?”

“I can’t see how Ms. Chandler could be an intended victim,” (wormtongue) slimed Mr. Davies. I would use the word ‘said’ but the way he spoke was

just dripping with, I don't know, evil lab assistant. "We didn't even know that Ms. Chandler would be operating one of the pressure washers. Besides, everyone liked her. Mr. Lee wasn't so liked. He kept his head down and did his job. That makes for poor television."

Several other questions yielded no new answers, and I eventually dismiss the pair to the broadcast van. "Lickspittle," muttered Officer Walker, leading me to give him a sideways glance.

"My mom would've called Mr. Davies a lickspittle," he explained. "It's a word my mom used meaning 'spineless lackey.'"

"You made that up didn't you," I retort.

"Which part?"

"Your mom never said that. Oh hell. You're using that damn synonym app again aren't you?"

"A bit," he admitted. "It's addictive. That was the word of the day and, well, it fits." Reprimand later, interrogate now. Reprimand later, interrogate now. That becomes my mantra while I figure out which crew members I want to talk to next. Thankfully those thoughts are interrupted by the arrival of Darryl Silverstone, who immediately notices the pressure washer and follows the charred wall and ceiling over to the fuse box, which he makes a b-line for, and I follow.

"I haven't seen anything like this since introductory electronics back in high school," he said. "Whoever did this didn't need to have an electronics degree." He fished around in the fuse box for a moment, wearing heavy rubber gloves, I might add, and eventually pulls out what looks like one of the fuses, except it only looks that way on the outside. "See, this is what I expected," he says, indicating a charred metallic sliver connecting the interior parts of the fuse. "Anyone who's taken a beginner's electronics course can do this. I knew it as soon as I saw those scorch marks."

He carefully removed the sliver and looked at it closely. "You have a suspect with the initials LSD?" he chuckled. "Who would give their kid's those initials on purpose? Anyway, this looks like it was a tie-clip." I look at Officer Walker who is already consulting his notes.

“Samuel,” he eventually says. “Lindsay Samuel Davies.”

“Lickspittle,” I reply. Darryl looks confused and I tell Officer Walker to explain while I go arrest Mr. Davies. It isn’t long before I have him in interrogation room one, all nice and booked. I do have to wait for his attorney to arrive and then they consult for an hour before I’m allowed to talk to him. His excuse is only slightly above pathetic.

“The producer insisted that I make sure that Mr. Lee didn’t win the show,” he oozed. “His kind doesn’t make for good television. I was told to stop him no matter what. My electronics course in college reminded me about this trick we used to play. Rig the fuse and give someone a start when they tried to use an outlet.

“Mr. Lee was substantial enough that it would have only stunned him,” he continued. “It would have make him look bad when Mr. Pronger was also shocked outside since Mr. Lee was the one who installed most of the electrical system. With those two out of the way, and Mr. Smith ineligible, Ms. Chandler wins and we get our ratings. As I said before, I didn’t know that Michael and Shannon switched places.”

The lawyer tries to plea bargain with me, but I waive him off. I’m not putting in a good word for him on this. A confession after we arrest him may do something for the DA, but for me, no. Especially not for something like this. I leave the interrogation room and am grateful to not have to deal with slime like him again... until his trial, anyway. I suspect some network bigwigs might get brought in on this, too.

That’s when I notice Officer Walker returning from the scene. “Hey Scott, I got a question for you. What was the prize on that show anyway?” He looks surprised at the question and consults his notebook. *Obviously not that great a prize*, I think.

“No, it’s good,” he replies to my thought, which was spooky. Or did I say that out loud? “They were building the house to give a home to three homeless families. Paid for for a year. Probably not much in the long run but better than being homeless, right? The contest winner gets a similar house built by professionals at the location of their choosing.” He ends with a significant downturn to his attitude.

I think for a moment before asking, “Why not just use the professionals to build the house for the homeless?”

“My guess, publicity,” he says wryly. “How else could the network appear so altruistic?”