

CUSTOMER SERVICE



**a Cooper Wright mystery
by Rob Steele**

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“The problem, Lieutenant Wright, is that we have had so many complaints about her before. I couldn’t substantiate them at first but we put that recorder by her register and once I saw just one day of her actual work, well, I was going to fire her today. But Cynthia was in a car accident and we were going to be short staffed for about a week and I didn’t really see much of a choice. I mean, one more week. What could it hurt? Right?”

I nodded sympathetically. I worked my

way through school in retail and fast-food. I've been on the other side of the counter and know that it's a real pain in the ass. "We need to see the recording. Actually, that one and your regular security footage, too."

"Certainly. But I'm not sure it will help. The recording I made has sound, unlike our regular footage, but you can't see any faces of the customers." I'm not sure why he thinks we can't sync the two up but there we go. I leave that to Darryl Silverstone, our resident techie. Find the bad seeds and maybe we get some good suspects. Mr. Bannow looks genuinely remorseful and is being

quite helpful. I'm not even sure he realizes that recordings like the one he just made are, well, let's just say they're not entirely legal, although they may be legal in India, where I suspect he's from. It's partly the skin coloring but mostly the accent. I am a detective, y'know.

I realize I'm kinda starting this story in the middle. Let me back up a bit. Two days ago, we got a call about a body in an alleyway. Caucasian woman, maybe early 50s, a bit hefty. Hands and feet looks like they were bound with zip ties. Doc Young confirmed that at autopsy. Cause of death? She was

asphyxiated. People asphyxiate all the time, but the zip ties and body dump made suicide really, really unlikely.

The thing we didn't have was an ID. That's why it took two days to get to Saffron Faire, a local Indian / French restaurant. Eventually we got a hit from a missing person report.

Charmaine LeFont, 52, single. Mr. Ranjeet Bannow, the restaurant manager, confirmed her ID and we got her story. He said that no one really liked her because she was hateful. He said she was great during the interview, but when it came to actual customer service she was, let's say,

lacking. He's the one who filed the report when she didn't show up for work. He knew that she didn't have any family and, he suspected that because of her attitude, probably not many friends.

And watching this video, I'm surprised someone didn't kill her in the restaurant. I mean, I've never eaten at Saffron Faire, Indian food and I don't agree and French is not my kind of thing, but even if I liked it, I wouldn't come back if I knew this woman worked here. Wow! She is hateful.

Darryl synched the video from the surveillance system with the video Mr.

Bannow made and... Well, I'm amazed that Mr. Bannow kept her even being short-staffed. Most of the comments I'm hearing, I don't want to repeat, even in a police report. Hate-filled, racist diatribes. Unless the customer was just as pale-skinned as she was, and spoke English in her dialect, she let them know that she hated them. The 'N' word, sure. Grew up around that one. Heard way too much of it during my daughter's "gansta rap" phase. Thank god for jazz, right? But some of these words even I'm not familiar with. And some, I know she isn't using right.

There's a couple who look to be Indian, as in India not Native American, and she called them Abu's. I'm not 100% certain but I think she might have meant Apu's, like the Indian storekeeper in the Simpsons instead of Abu, the monkey from Aladdin. But what do I know? Racism is based on pure ignorance anyway. I'm not sure I'd want to get into her mind.

Unfortunately, I *do* have to get into the mind of the person who killed her.

Although at this point, I'm thinking her death might not have been such a bad thing. There's so much hate going on right now. I sigh and put that thought out of my mind. Everyone deserves

equal treatment under the law.

The problem is that this video didn't narrow anything down. Not really. It got rid of the white people. In an Indian restaurant, that didn't help much. Most of the customers had some non-Caucasian coloring in their skin, and she bad-mouthed ALL of them. Of the 150 or so customer groups, we could rule out two couples. 313 customers. And that's just the one day of Bannow's recording. Who's to say it wasn't a customer from a previous day? Or not related to her work at all. Maybe she was hateful to everyone and she just pissed someone

off somewhere else.

There was something else that bothered me about this case. Her address. Not that it was in August Acres, the most cursed subdivision in town, but that it was on the other side of town. There were other places she could have worked that were closer. And ones that made more sense with her... inability to get along with anyone who wasn't, well, her.

I give Detective Manny Vasquez and Officer Scott Walker the list of customers from the recording. A list that was surprisingly easy for Darryl to compile. He says he just cross-

referenced the credit card purchases with the timestamp on the video as we were watching. It's not a complete list but it covered all but two of the paying customers. That didn't surprise me, really. Who uses cash anymore?

But I had a visit to pay to someone in August Acres.

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Sandarella Disney was a woman I'd met on a previous case in August Acres. Nice woman, although she probably smokes a bit much. But for me, that's a good thing. She smokes outside where she can be a bit, let's say, nosy.

I've learned that if you want to know anything that's going on in this neighborhood, you ask Sandarella.

"Are you sure we're talking about the same woman?" she drawled.

"Charmaine LeFont? 50-something? A bit chunky?" I nodded puzzledly. "And you're saying she was a hateful racist working at as a cashier?" I nodded again.

"That's just weird," she replied taking a long drag on her cigarette. She continued talking while exhaling, the smoke forming a strange cloud around her face and head. "I saw Charmaine almost every night. I just thought she

was on vacation or something. But LeFont is her stage name. Her real last name is Simmons. Y'see, she's an actress. Got a few bit parts over the years in sitcoms or background parts in a crime drama. But she was always nice and happy. She'd walk around the neighborhood almost every night. Always nice. Always pleasant."

She took another drag on the cigarette. "But you say she was being racist at a restaurant? As the cashier? That doesn't make any sense. That'd just drive customers away, wouldn't it? Maybe it was a role she was practicing for. She'd need lots of practice. She

was so nice to everyone regardless of skin color or... religion. Hell, she *was* religious! I can't see her saying some racial slur even for a role. It just wasn't in her."

I thanked Sandarella for her time and put in a call to Darryl Silverstone. I ask him to get the financials for the *Saffron Faire*. If Sanderella is right, then something else is very wrong here. And I have a sneaking suspicion of what it is.

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A few hours later, I have Mr. Ranjeet Bannow brought into interrogation

room one. “Mr. Bannow, we did some looking into the Saffron Faire and, frankly, sales haven’t been that good lately. In fact, they’re dropping rather sharply.”

“Well, yes. Our sales aren’t good lately. I suspect it will pick up a bit now that Charmaine is no longer with us, God rest her soul.”

“What I’m wondering is, how you found her in the first place.” Mr. Bannow looked puzzled. “I’ll explain. I did some research into Ms. LeFont, who is really Ms. Simmons. She’s an actress. Does a lot of stage work, but some television, too. She doesn’t need

a waitress job. She's actually somewhat successful. So how did you manage to hire her away from the career she wanted?

“Now I looked into your financials, too. And I didn't find enough in your *American* accounts to pay her off. But I did find several other accounts in Switzerland and the Caimans. I don't know too many restaurant managers who have enough money to keep it there. Especially restaurants as small as the Saffron Faire. I think it's time you told me what's going on.”

Sanjeet looked, well, sweaty and nervous. Then he asked for a lawyer. I

rather expected that. After meeting for about an hour with a lawyer that looked way out of his tax bracket, the district attorney was called in. I was left out of that conversation. We resumed our conversation about an hour later.

“Mr. Bannow has agreed to tell you what you wish to know,” Isaac Gregg, the lawyer, sneered, “in return for immunity for his crimes here in America.” I gave a sideways glance at the DA, who just shrugged. I returned the gesture and waited for Mr. Bannow to tell me what he knows.

Eventually, he began. “I worked for

what you call a drug cartel in India. It was not voluntary but it paid well. I was an accountant. As my little revenge for forcing me into that life, I stole several million dollars and hid it in accounts around the world. One day, they said they'd found another accountant to take over from me. I did not understand why. I suspected they knew about the money I stole, but no one ever came after me.

"I came to America to hide. I thought I'd gotten away with it," his expression turned dour. "But that's when I was contacted by a Chinese man named Alfred Gao, the owner of the Saffron

Faire. He said he knew what I had done and that if I wanted to really get away with it, I had to work for him.”

Bannow sniffled. “I don’t know how he found out. I really don’t know how he managed to block access to most of my bank accounts. I couldn’t get away and I was afraid for my life. So, I worked for him.”

He perked up a little as he told this part. “That’s when I got the idea to hire an actress to sabotage the restaurant. I’d seen Ms. LaFont on television and knew she lived in town. I hired her through her agent, a Ms. Paris. I told her I wanted her to be the

most obnoxious and racist person possible. I was hoping to drive the business into the ground, as you say, so I could escape. I even made that recording to make it look like I was really trying to make the restaurant work, but I don't think that plan went too well."

He looked despondent. "She told me her last day there that she was quitting. She said that it was a horrible job and that she just couldn't do it anymore. And I understood. That's what I was trying to do, after all. I could hire another actor, yes? One with a worse attitude. I didn't want to

make her do it but I didn't see any other way out. So, yes, I let her go," he sighed. "But I didn't kill her. I never wanted into a life of crime. I had enough trouble laundering the money for the cartel."

"I thought it would be easier here in America," he continued. "Everyone is always coming to the states for a better life. I drank that Kool-aid, too. And look what it got me!"

Drinking the Kool-aid. I hate that term. Came from the Jonestown massacre where the so-called Reverend Jim Jones gave poison to his followers, and, thus the phrase was allegedly born. Except

he didn't use Kool-Aid; he used the knockoff Flavor Aid. Why people can't get that right...?

I have a talk with the DA and he's convinced that Bannow didn't kill Charmaine LeFont. I'm fairly convinced, too. Bannow is going to be put in witness protection until we find the restaurant owner, Mr. Gao. Although, that name sounds familiar. Gao.. and Ms. Paris, too.

Those named bugged me the rest of the day. It wasn't until I was on the way home that it hit me. *The Magic Club!* A few months ago, there was that killing by the magician which

might have been a hit but it was covered up by a hacker who managed to erase a vast majority of the evidence.

Are they back? And if so, what was the purpose of opening this restaurant and forcing a former crime syndicate accountant to manage it? I have this awful feeling that these cases are tied together somehow. And it's going to take a while to figure this one out!