

BUBBLES

I hate clowns. It's not a personal thing. Technically, I've never actually met someone who claims they're a clown. Not a real clown, anyway. Sure, there were class clowns. Then there's Roger in the fraud department, but he's more of a class clown wannabe. I think it has something to do with the makeup and the shoes. I have a built-in distrust of people who wear disguises. I'm a cop. I'm supposed to. That and 'creepy' plus 'over-the-top slapstick' never made much sense to me as a combination – like shrimp and chocolate sauce. Individually, sure. Together, no thanks.

So, when we get the call that there's been a homicide at the circus, part of me is perversely hopeful that it's a clown. I suppose the good news is, I got my wish. The bad news is, I now have to investigate who killed Bozo. "His name was 'Bubbles'."

"Right, thanks Manny. What was his real name?"

"He didn't have one. According to his driver's license, it's 'Bubbles.'" Manny handed me the license. It was hard to read in the clown trailer. A single lightbulb in a trailer that's supposed to house three clowns – that's a little sad. I look at the license and I guess this guy took his work *that* seriously. No first name, no last name – just 'Bubbles', which makes the license a bit fake since you can't legally do that.

I look down at the body that's missing most of its head and try not to even smirk. Somebody popped Bubbles. That's when I realize it's going to be one of those cases. It's not supposed to be funny when someone gets 'popped' with a shotgun at close range. I figure that's what it has to be. Anything bigger would have left gaping holes in the wall.

"Do we have the name of the other clowns in here? Or are they all pseudonyms?" Manny checks his notepad and gives me the names Snappy and Waldo – or Marcus Berman and Owen Reeves, depending on your perspective, I suppose, and they're both in the big top with the ringmaster, Darius Wolf and several officers to make sure none of them leave.

As Manny and I take our leave so Doctor Young and the CSIs can process the body and the darkened trailer, Manny tells me that this circus is usually just a spring-time activity for the locals. "It's kind of a fantasy camp thing. People train and sign up to perform, but they don't have to travel. They can keep their jobs and not have to worry about whether or not it will work as a career. Every spring they all camp here for a week or so and put on three shows starting this coming weekend."

"Why haven't I heard about this? I mean, I've lived here for, what? All my life."

"You don't like circuses."

"What makes you say that?"

"You don't like clowns, boss."

"Ok, fair enough." I try not to let my discomfort show. I don't know what it is about this case but it gives me the creeps. It's not that it's already gotten dark. I've worked plenty of cases at night. I think it might just be the combination of clowns, night time, and that we're not actually 'in town' as much as we are on the outskirts. It's just a creepy feeling. Like a horror movie.

I try to shrug that off as its time to talk to our suspects. The 'big top' isn't as big as the circuses where I learned to dislike clowns when I was a kid, but considering it's more of a fantasy camp, it's not bad. There are still three rings, although the two on either side are considerably smaller than the center one, and the center one is where I find seven uniformed officers on the outskirts of the ring loosely surrounding our three main suspects who are sitting on barrels.

I stop short of the rings and turn to Manny. "Something just occurred to me. See if you can find out if PETA or any of those animal rights groups are having an issue with this circus."

"Ok, boss," he replies, "but they don't have any animals here other than dogs. And they're the pets of the people who volunteer to perform. They just dress them up in costumes." I immediately picture someone's Chihuahua dressed in an elephant costume and have to stifle a chuckle.

"That may be true, but when I think circus, I think animals..."

"Because you don't like clowns," Manny interrupts.

He also ignores my scowl as I continue, "and if I think there might be animals, they might think that, too, and want to retaliate against 'animal oppression' or whatever they're calling it this week." Manny nods and heads outside to get a cleaner cell signal. Probably going to be calling Tim back at HQ. He's good at that kind of thing.

As I head back to the main ring, I realize I'm getting annoyed at PETA and their kind of group. They keep doing something that really annoys me. I mean, I might get behind some of these causes if they'd keep the name constant instead of changing it every few weeks. 'Animal Oppression', 'Animal Rights', 'Animal Endangerment', it all means the same thing so pick a name and leave it alone.

I look at the three suspects in the ring and decide that splitting them up would probably be best. I point at one of the clowns, Owen 'Waldo' Reeves, as it turns out, and motion for him to join me in one of the smaller rings. I figure I may as well get the clowns out of the way first. I'm not sure if it's the makeup and an act, but he holds Snappy's hand and looks forlornly at him as we step away from the group to talk. "And you two make such a cute couple," I begin sarcastically as we enter the second ring.

"Oh, thank you!" he beams. "We've only been married for three weeks but we've been together forever. I'm glad it shows." It takes me a moment to process that. A gay clown couple. Sure, why not? Gay means happy, right? And who's supposed to be more happy than a clown? Makes sense.

"So, erm, Owen, right? You're a part-time clown?"

"I used to be," he says with a modicum of pride. "I just changed to full-time when we got married. Marc is still a CPA and can easily support both of us. So, I decided to leave my life as a barista and become a clown full-time. I work parties and charities and I help out at the Children's Hospital downtown. I love seeing the smile on the kids' faces when I show up. And laughter is the best medicine!"

Overly perkiness. That's one of the reasons I don't like clowns. Too damn sprightly. "So, you're married to Marc, but you also had to work with 'Bubbles'. What can you tell me about him? Even a real name would help at this point."

Owen scowled. At least, I think he tried to. It's hard to tell with the perpetual smile painted on his face. "David Tumeric," he finally spat with a venom. "He gives all clowns a bad name. He's mean and cruel

and doesn't like children. He's a horrible person." A look of realization came across his face that even I had to smile about – the combination of his expression and the makeup was priceless. "Oh, my, god! I just made myself a suspect, didn't I?"

I chuckled and scratched absently at my forehead. "Honestly, no more so than you already were, really. So, you two didn't get along? Did that include Marc?"

"Oh honey, no one liked 'Bubbles'. But Marc and I were the ones who found him and called it in. Does that count for anything? I mean, we're only still here because we were practicing a new routine in the big top. I thought 'Bubbles' left hours ago." I thank Owen, tell him to wait with Marc in the main ring, text Manny with the name 'David Tumeric', and call Darius Wolf over. The ringmaster certainly looks the part. Black boots, white tights, flamboyant red jacket with big gold buttons. He even has the hat, and I thought he had the big handlebar mustache, but as he approaches, I see him remove it and put it in a jacket pocket.

"I thought I should be upfront with you," he says with all the expected bravado of a circus ringmaster. "And I'll be forthcoming about something else, too. I'm your primary suspect. Although, I didn't do it." I knew it couldn't be *that* easy. "Earlier today, and I haven't announced this yet, I fired Mr. Tumeric. There were just too many complaints about his conduct, and, after his stunt last year, I was hoping he'd learned his lesson. 10-minutes into this season and I could tell he hadn't."

"What did he do last year?"

"Well, it was a circus staple really – the bucket switch. It's a clown thing. Make it look like you have a bucket of water but when you throw it on the crowd, it's full of confetti. 'Bubbles' thought it would be funny to actually use water. He doused the first three rows. The circus deflected the lawsuits over the damaged cell phones to him, but I guess he didn't learn. I heard he paid everything off though. Not sure where he got the money. As far as I know, he was a full-time clown, but I don't know anyone who actually hired him."

"If he had no, let's say, references, how did he get involved with this circus? I know it's a volunteer outfit, but there has to be some credential checking, right? A background check of some kind."

"Oh, he passed the background check. But I can't see that any of his references had to do with being a clown. I think he found a way to bully his way in. I don't really know. I've only been in-charge for three years, this being the third. He was here long before I was. And I know it's not much of an alibi, but I was here with Owen and Marc going over their new act. We're each other's alibi, but we're also the three best suspects. I don't know about them, but I thought 'Bubbles' left a few hours ago."

That's two who thought 'Bubbles' was gone. A quick interview with Marc made it three for three. Not that I had many questions for 'Snappy', but about what I would consider halfway through, I get a call from Dr. Young.

"Your case is about to take on a whole different look, Cooper. The man with the missing face is not 'Bubbles'." Well, I wasn't expecting that. "Manny found Mr. Tumeric has a record and his fingerprints on file do not match the remainder of the corpse I have here. The fingerprints match Herbert Zobol. A Polish immigrant who works for a sanitation company."

“Well, of course he does,” I reply, rolling my eyes appropriately – not that Doc can see that over a phone call. I thank Doc and turn my attention back to ‘Snappy.’ “Does the name Herbert Zobol mean anything to you?”

‘Snappy’ looks perplexed for a moment before having his realization. “Oh, Herbie! Yeah. The janitor guy. He’s come in the tent a few times. Said he always liked clowns. Owen and I made him up one time. He said he’d like to be a clown in the show, but that’s when ‘Bubbles’ came in and had a fit over it. ‘Three clowns is enough,’ he said, and threw Herbie out of the trailer. Literally. It was not a good situation. We did catch Herbie in the trailer that one time, trying on makeup. We didn’t mind. After ‘Bubbles’, it was good to see someone who was actually enthusiastic about being a clown.”

Manny interrupted this time, surprisingly, by phone. He said that Tim had updated him on the situation and a car registered to Tumeric was still here, so maybe Tumeric was, too. I tell ‘Snappy’ to wait with the others and join Manny outside the tent.

“If he’s here, he’s probably still got that shotgun he used on Zobol. You see anything moving around out here?” Manny and I scan the area around the big top. We rule out the main tent as we’ve been in there and haven’t seen anyone. There are seven other trailers, but they’re dark. Manny says the clowns are the first to show up for this and no one else is supposed to be here until later this week. There’s the crime scene – which is taped off and guarded by another officer, and a supply tent. Otherwise there is a large amount of nothing.

Since Manny says he checked the other trailers when he got here and they’re all locked, we decided to check the supply tent. It’s about half the size of the big top, but nowhere near as empty. It’s also dark. Manny flipped the power switch so it is lit, barely. The tent is full of spare bleachers, enormous spools of trapeze wires, animal cages, hoops, and a lot of other paraphernalia you’d expect to find at a circus. Although rather than finding it in the show, it’s all piled up in here... the poorly lit circus tent that may contain a deranged lunatic clown with a shotgun – swell.

Unlike a Scooby-Doo cartoon, which this almost feels like, we don’t split up. Manny and I both have our weapons drawn and are using flashlights to try to illuminate the room. We start making our way around the right side of the tent, when a series of noises, a large bang, a muttered curse and a strange organ-like music, begins on the left side of the tent. We both change our direction and head toward the disturbance.

“What the hell is that?”

Manny tilts his head and replies, “It sounds calliopean.”

“What?”

“You know, like a calliope. The big circus organ thing.”

“I’m not sure that’s a word, Manny. Hang on a minute! You’re not using Tim’s synonym app aren’t you?” Before he can answer, we both hear the distinct sound of a shotgun being racked and we both dive for cover. I think my hiding behind a hotdog vendor cart might be a bit better than Manny’s net of prefilled balloons. The reaction is almost a reflex though and it’s not his fault there was nothing there to hide behind. Not that it mattered. The shot that came took out the calliope.

All of the sudden it was quiet. I notice that my dive for cover has put me close to a clearing on the far side of the stack of equipment, so, I slowly and quietly make for the opening. Staying close to the ground, I poke my head out and, down the aisle of circus apparatus, I see a pair of enormous red shoes and the lower half of really baggy blue pants with yellow polka-dots. I can see why he didn't run for it – lousy running shoes and I think those pants might just glow-in-the-dark.

I signal to Manny to distract him while I move in from behind. "David Tumeric! This is the police," calls Manny in his most official sounding voice.

"My name is 'Bubbles'! You cops should get it right." While I am moving toward the suspect, I do glance back at Manny, who is trying really hard not to laugh.

"Ok. Bubbles! This is still the police. We have the tent surrounded. Put down your weapon and come out with your hands above your head!"

I am about three steps from making my move when 'Bubbles' announces, "Ok, since you asked nicely." I can't believe it. That never works. There's always a standoff. I suppose it was reflexive of me to mutter "Really?" which was almost a mistake. Apparently, I startled 'Bubbles' who turned to see me, with my gun pointed at him, which caused him to stumble and drop the shotgun, which goes off and starts the calliope playing again, albeit in a horrifically broken manner.

'Bubbles' starts crying and saying he's sorry as he rolls over on his stomach and puts his hands over his head. "I just lost my temper. I didn't mean to shoot Herbie. I just caught him stealing my makeup! Pretty soon I was sure he'd steal my job, too! Trump was right. Damn immigrants!"

Great! Not only is he a clown, but he's a stupid, bigoted clown. I keep my gun trained on him while Manny moves in and cuffs him. As I pick up the shotgun, I kick the calliope and, mercifully, it stops, well, I would say 'playing' but it really sounded more like a hungover moose.

"Hey boss," Manny began inquisitively, "how are we gonna get him in the back of the car?" I don't initially understand the question until I follow Manny's gaze, and he's got a point – sort of.

"The shoes are removable, Manny. I'm pretty sure his feet aren't actually that big."