

Rat Tracking

By Wes Ishmael

On the way to see Roy Bean “Benny” Wilson at the rancher-attorney’s sporadically used and closet-size office in Amarillo, Hooter was still amazed at what he’d seen from his hidey hole at the makeshift dirt track.

Here was Eunice Nickelcock and Cornelius Highbottom III a.k.a. Flash—both ordinarily awkward at best and downright weird at the worst—meeting for the first time and making eyes for each other. Maybe Sherry was right. Maybe the connection between them that neither knew about was pulling them together. Eunice was the victim of a frame-up job by two supposed animal rights organizations, which were funded heavily by Highbottom’s family corporation, though he had no idea.

Hooter was thinking all that as he trudged up the last steps.

Suspicious Confirmed

“That greasy, flower child reject pal of yours is still a seedy, no-count, low-life character in my books, but at least he’s good at what he does,” Benny growled. “I don’t know how he got his hands on their books—not the public ones, but the real ones—and I don’t want to know.”

The seedy pal in question and known well by both of them was the clandestine Myron, whom Hooter had enlisted for Operation Bald Coyote.

Wilson tossed a heavy ream of papers across his desk to Hooter. The books in question were from the Pet Protection Society (PPS) and People for the Ethical Treatment of All Life (PETAL). There were also the personal financials of Vernon Caterwauler (second in charge of PPS) and Ernest Nimblewimp (head of PETAL). Hooter had learned they were the two responsible for framing Eunice for their larcenous skullduggery. As a smokescreen, they’d also set her loose upon Hooter when she was a PETAL executive. Her run-ins with Hooter drove her toward and over the edge on several occasions. So, it turned out, they had also used Hooter in their nefarious scheme.

To top it off, Vernon and his wife, Martha Caterwauler, owned the Gentle Peace and Balance Institute to which Eunice had been committed intermittently, escaping each time.

“It’s all there,” Benny scowled, before launching a mighty stream of tobacco juice at a coffee can in the corner. Hooter noted from the carpet stains that Benny’s aim was invariably poor.

Hooter leafed through the first few pages. They were covered with endless columns and rows of numbers. Spurts of red ink from Benny’s fountain pen underlined specific sections with arrows pointing to other numbers and to notes in the margins.

It was all Greek to Hooter.

“Don’t feel bad,” Benny offered, holding out his meaty hand to retrieve the stack of papers. “Not many folks know how to follow a rabbit trail like this. If you do know how, though, it makes for mighty interesting reading, at least in terms of greed and stupidity.”

“The bottom line of it is that Vernon has been siphoning money from PPS and laundering it through PETAL. From there, Vernon and Ernest have been sucking the war chest of PETAL. It’s beyond seven figures and these books nail them dead to rights.”

Hooter was unsurprised to find proof of their criminality, but he couldn’t help but be amazed by the economic magnitude.

“I never...” Hooter began before Benny’s impatience won out.

“You might have never,” Benny scowled, spitting on the corner of the carpet again. “But lots of other folks have, be it more subtly or more overtly. I recommend to your reading one of the more noteworthy robber barons of the age, Jay Gould, and how he snookered his partners and even Cornelius Vanderbilt out of the Erie Railroad.”

“So...” Hooter tried again.

“So, when all is said and done, Vernon and his missus, along with Ernie ought to be serving some meaningful time in a public institution, and that’s not counting charges that could be levied against them for the false imprisonment of this Nickelcock woman...”

“But...” Hooter tried.

“I know, I know,” Benny spat at the can again and missed again. “We can’t do that because you want her to be able to saunter off the grid. Anyway, their little world is fixing to go on permanent tilt whenever we pull the trigger. And, I suspect some state and federal officials will also be eager to audit the books of their so-called non-profit organizations.”

“So...” Hooter tried one more time.

“So, you pull that trigger whenever and however you want. I’m ready when you are. As for the rest of it with Eunice jumping the grid, Highbottom cutting off money to those organizations, etc., etc., that’s up to you and Myron.”

“Benny?” Hooter asked, as he got up to leave.

“Yep.”

“Maybe if you start aiming for the carpet, you’ll hit that coffee can once in a while.”

Easing Into First Gear

Cornelius Highbottom III, aka Flash, had never felt so alive. For the first time in his pampered existence he felt like he had a purpose.

In fact, whether it was getting to fulfill his long-secret racing ambitions, or meeting Eunice or both, family embarrassment be damned, he was even thinking he might inform his staff that he was in fact a mini monster truck race driver and proud of the fact.

Plus, Billy Jim had informed him that the first race in the inaugural Wild Cat Racing Series was less than a month away.

“There’s only one small catch,” Billy Jim told him, leaning in to bark in a tone that was supposed to be more confidential. “I’ve got people who handle the sponsorships for our series, just as I suspect you have folks who handle different things in your business.”

“Yes.” Flash had no idea who did what in his multi-national corporation or what exactly that multi-national corporation did. He certainly hadn’t wondered about it since telling his long-time executive assistant, Edward Flincher, that he was taking a sabbatical.

He'd further instructed Flincher he was only to be contacted via their shared private phones in case of an emergency.

"Turns out, one of the companies you own is sponsoring our series."

Flash plucked up a bit, proud to know that his own company had that kind of smarts.

"However, a little birdie also tells me you have another company, or branch, or something that gives money away to charitable organizations," Billy Jim continued.

That sounded vaguely familiar to Flash. "Yes, I believe it's called..."

"That don't matter," Billy Jim interrupted. "My little birdie tells me there are a couple of organizations you fund with some executives who have been up to all kinds of no good, including embezzlement. The legal hammer is supposed to fall on them soon. Sounds like it will be a plumb public mash-up."

Flash was trying hard to see how this had anything to do with him and wanting to climb back in his mini monster truck.

"Bad as I hate to say it, Flash, I don't know how we can keep you as a driver without taking all of that bad press from this fiasco right along with you, what with your company funding these organizations that are fixing to be drug through the brambles."

There was silence as the puzzle pieces slid into place. Then, Flash's eyes, well, they flashed, sparked with sudden anger and conviction. Suddenly, he understood what was at stake for him.

"I'm not going anywhere, Mr. Hurstknob, and neither is my company's sponsorship of the Wildcat series," Flash said calmly. "Rather than negative press, I believe we can get some positive news and free advertising for the series."

Flash didn't even call anyone to see if what Billy Jim had told him was true. Although folks Myron had planted within Highbottom's organization would have quickly confirmed Billy Jim's news, the fact was that Flash trusted him. More important, there was something inside of him that Flash was beginning to trust.

Armed with the names Myron had jotted down for Billy Jim, Flash called his administrative assistant.

"Our charitable trust, or one of them at least, is about to be made a mockery," Highbottom shouted into the phone. "How is it that I know executives for the Pet Protection Society and People for the Ethical Treatment of All Life are about to be brought up on charges of embezzlement and who knows what else, yet no one in my organization does?"

Edward Flincher recognized his boss's voice, but he'd never heard the tone before, let alone actual orders.

"Set up a conference call in exactly two hours for you, me, whoever is in charge of our trust and whoever is charge of our PR department. Hop to it!"

Click.

Meanwhile, of course, no one knew that Vernon Caterwauler and Ernest Nimblewimp were hatching a plan of their own, believing they still had time to retrieve Eunice Nickelcock and avoid permanent damage.

Well, almost nobody.

To be continued...

