

Six Degrees of Separation continued...

Start Your Engines

By Wes Ishmael

“Just a little easier than spotting a bull moose in a one-horse trailer,” Myron said. He was telling Hooter and Roy Bean “Benny” Wilson how he discovered the perfect chink in the corporate armor of Cornelius Highbottom III.

Cornelius had a secret passion for car racing and everything related to it. And, he was deathly afraid someone would find out. As his late father scolded him when a young Cornelius had the audacity to express excitement over a friend’s slot car track, “People of our breeding don’t find pleasure in such tawdry pursuits, let alone associate with those who do.”

Subsequently, Cornelius developed elaborate methods to order and receive a steady flow of gear, games, magazines and movies to sate his racecar jones.

Cornelius would place his order under an assumed name, then have it hand-delivered to a mailbox rented under a different assumed name, at one of those ubiquitous strip malls. These packages were then retrieved and hand-delivered to someone with another assumed name, at a coffee shop about three blocks away from where Cornelius lived.

Cornelius always gave strict instructions at which patio table he would be sitting and when. The package was to be delivered to no one else but him or forfeit the three-figure tip. He was easy to spot, disguised with a long black wig, tie-dyed bowling shirt, orange Bermuda shorts—no matter the season—and purple clogs; something of a colorblind gypsy wannabe.

It was as simple for Myron to work backwards and unravel the delivery chain as it was for him to spot Cornelius emerge in his colorful garb.

“Lord, that man works hard at hiding for being so lousy at it,” Myron said. “No one dresses like that. I don’t care how tasteless you are.”

Myron was in charge of executing the strategy Benny devised for a plan Hooter dubbed Operation Bald Coyote. The scheme aimed to extract retribution from the leftwing animal activist groups, People for the Ethical Treatment of All Life (PETAL) and its parent organization, the Pet Protection Society (PPS). Hooter was also after the Gentle Balance and Peace Institute. All of them played a hand in pretty well ruining the life of one Eunice Nickelcock, the deposed PETAL director who had been a thorn in Hooter’s side for years. He finally figured out she’d been duped by the organizations.

“That’s why I called Billy Jim,” Myron explained.

Checking the Dip Stick

Billy Jim Hurstknob, the one who called Cornelius out of the blue, was not a fictional character.

“Mr. Highbottom?”

“Speaking.” Cornelius had made double sure to mute the sound that had been blaring a race rerun on his widescreen TV.

“Mr. Highbottom, you don’t know me. My name is Billy Jim Hurstknob. I’m president of the Wildcat Super Sport series racing outfit.”

Cornelius’ heart did a couple of extra laps. His palms were sweating as he looked around the room, then peered between a crack in the drapes. A racing outfit? How could anyone know?

“You won’t have heard of us, Mr. Highbottom. We’re brand new, but we think we have a format that can challenge the big boys.”

“How...how did you get my name?” Cornelius asked, his mind spinning with how embarrassing it would be if anyone found out.

There was a chuckle on the other end. “The better question, Mr. Highbottom might be how you found us.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Well, you see...”

Billy Jim had been, in fact, a dirt track racer of some repute once upon a time.

The Wildcat Super Sport Racing Series was real, too, inasmuch as Billy Jim was trying to secure sponsors for it.

“Vintage mini monster trucks,” Billy Jim explained to Cornelius when they finally met at the makeshift racecourse on a non-disclosed patch of non-productive ground somewhere in North Texas or Southern Oklahoma.

“Our Wildcat Series has everything. Nostalgia, familiarity and affordability, the kind of racing lots of fans grew up watching.” Billy Jim explained. “Points and standings are for sissies. We’re all about who gets to the flag first and period.”

That was the first full sentence uttered by Billy Jim that Cornelius felt like he understood.

Specifically, the vision for the Wildcat Series called for racing stock, full-sized pickups—model years 1960-1980—suped up however you wanted, using an approved list of after-market parts.

“See, mini monster trucks,” Billy Jim chortled, sounding a whole lot like Mater, that rusty tow truck character from the Cars movie. “Thought of it all on my ownsome,” Billy Jim laughed again, slapping Cornelius on the back, something the sheltered and kept Cornelius had never experienced before. He liked it.

It was also true of that initial phone conversation that one of Cornelius Highbottom III’s many companies had contacted Billy Jim to inquire about sponsorship possibilities. It was a trust administered by one of Cornelius’ other company’s that was a key contributor to both PETAL and PPS, unbeknownst to Cornelius.

“So, he’s guilty by association,” Hooter said at the outset. “But I think we can help him by helping him to help us.”

Billy Jim was also telling the truth about Cornelius’ driving potential, insofar as that’s what Myron had told him. Myron didn’t mention the fact that Cornelius didn’t even have a driver’s license though he was well north of middle age.

Taking It Off The Blocks

Maybe it was the endless hours watching car races on TV.
Maybe it was the countless video racing games.

Fact was that Cornelius—henceforth to be known as Flash, the nickname Billy Jim gave him—was something of a natural behind the wheel, much to everyone’s surprise, including his own.

“Don’t hit anyone or anything unless they need slowed down,” Billy Jim told Flash at the first practice session. “Speed, speed, speed. Every gear, every little shift of the wheel, where you sit in the cockpit and when, you think speed and how to get more of it. Unless you’re going faster, you slowing down.”

Flash nodded.

Billy Jim swept his hand across the horizon. “See all of that brush and all of those rocks? They don’t need slowed down.”

Flash seemed to have an innate aptitude for understanding physics and aerodynamics. He also enjoyed the newfound freedom and exhilaration of hiding out. Plus, there was fearlessness about him, presumably borne from the fact that he had no earthly idea what he had to lose. All told, Flash had a feel for speed.

Flash would shriek with joy and then mash the accelerator when he saw, Billy Jim drop the green and white, checkered flag. He was driving a baby blue, 1967 GMC with a long bed, roll bar, brush guard, mud tires and boasting a modified 454 under the hood.

Whenever Billy Jim raised the red flag, Flash would coast into the makeshift pit, glower with his bottom lip stuck out like a kid who has just seen his balloon popped.

“Mr. Hurstknob, when do we race for real,” Flash would ask excitedly every time he had to hand over the keys at the end of a practice session. And each time, the erstwhile racing promoter would tell him, “First of all, it ain’t Mr. Hurstknob, it’s Billy Jim—got it knucklehead?”

“Yes sir,” Flash would say glumly.

“Second of all, like I’ve said before, Flash, you just concentrate on driving faster, while we keep working on the engine to get it to turn faster. But, it will be sooner than you think.”

On this particular day, Billy Jim grinned wide and added, “Besides, you’ve got visitors.”

Finding First Gear

Hooter was one of the visitors, though hidden to observe from a decrepit deer stand that Billy Jim used as an observation post to track and time Flash.

Other visitors included Sherry and Auntie Marie, who had sheltered Eunice and done a remarkable job of transforming her into something that appeared normal. The other visitor, of course, was the newly minted version of Eunice Nickelcock.

“It couldn’t hurt anything,” Sherry had told Hooter, when suggesting the meeting between Flash and Eunice. “There’s nothing certain, but there is energy in two people so closely connected meeting one another.”

“Seems like I heard you say something similar in Baton Rouge one time right before the police showed up,” Hooter responded. For the life of him, though, he couldn’t find a good argument against the notion.

So, here was Billy Jim introducing the Wildcat Series’ first driver to Eunice, who had become his lone fan, watching a video documentary Myron’s folks had pieced together—in the name of promoting the nascent Wildcat series Billy Jim had told him and believed to be true.

The view inside his binoculars reminded Hooter a whole bunch of parents trying to get their kids to loosen up and consider chatting at a 4-H dance. Eunice and Flash fidgeted back and forth, smiling as if they shouldn’t and only looking at each other by accident.

Billy Jim had a 1954 Chevy Bel Air, 3-speed on the column, faded green with a hint of rust-orange. He’d cut the top off and never gotten back around to working on it.

Hooter saw Billy Jim push Flash toward the car. He saw Sherry do the same with Eunice.

It must have been instinct. Hooter watched as Flash ushered Eunice to the passenger door and help her get settled. Then, and Hooter couldn’t help but chuckle; Flash placed one hand on the driver-side door and tried to vault into the seat. Suffice it to say that the stumbling, tumbling half-gainer left Flash with one gangly leg flung over the back seat, the other wedged between spindles on the steering wheel and his head resting in Eunice’s lap.

Based on previous experience, Hooter expected Eunice to shriek, cuss, flail, kick, skedaddle, most anything except what he saw her do. She calmly placed one manicured hand in Flash’s shaggy hair, another on his stubbly face and gave him one of those gentle, earth-shattering smiles reserved for Moms and angels.

Flash smiled back.

Hooter didn’t know if it was some voo-doo potion cooked up by Sherry and Auntie Marie, or if it was nature at work, but it was plain to see that Flash and Eunice were plumb smitten with one another.

Now, it was time to start working on the real vermin Operation Bald Coyote was designed to catch.

To be continued...