

THE MOST EXPENSIVE MISTRESS
IN JEFFERSON COUNTY

4:09 a.m. June 8, 1998 Monday

The phone rang. He forced one eye open and looked at the clock. It was 0409 hours. He made a mental note to change the clock back to a.m. and p.m. tomorrow. That crazy air force woman was always changing the clocks.

“Hello,” he said.

“Hi. You in bed?”

“Yes.”

“Asleep?”

“Not now.”

“Roger just took off up the river. He wants to be there by six. Your door unlocked?”

“You know it is.”

“I’ll be over. Bye.”

Sue Diggs sure has a sweet voice on the phone. Especially when she wants something. I wonder if I can perform twice in one night? Might be I can.

He lay in bed with his eyes closed listening to the occasional traffic on the road to the lake. In the state of half sleep he recalled his beginnings with Sue at the marina.

“But you’re married,” she said.

Hawk pulled on his lower cheek. “So are you.”

Her smile was infectious. His eyes took in her dark short lean endowed body. When he looked up a smile crept across his face and their eyes had a mutual understanding.

He tipped up his beer. She did the same and within an hour they each had five empties stacked beside them. He had never drunk that many beers and later he recognized it as a purposeful distraction to avoid what was happening between them; a brief blocking and prolonging of the inevitable.

“Let’s take a boat ride,” he said.

Sue giggled her eyes coy under the dark eyelashes. “I don’t know if I can walk let alone get in a boat.” She stood up and he held her arm. He wasn’t very stable either.

During the time they spent getting the boat the marina operator showed some concern as to their sobriety and ability to run it. After they had been shown how to start and operate the motor, Hawk went back and got another six-pack, grinning like a high school kid when he set the frosty beer under the seat.

For the first fifteen minutes they motored close to the bank until they came to a passage between the shore and a small island covered with scrub brush.

Sue pointed to the island. “Let’s go over there.” Then she stood up, the boat tilted and for a moment she was parallel to the water, her laughing face looked at him before she was enveloped in the water.

Like drawing a pistol, Hawk whipped out his wallet, threw it in the boat and dived in after her. He cupped his arm around her and towed her to shore while she coughed and spit and laughed. While they sat on the shore chuckling, a gentle breeze shoved the boat up on the sand. Hawk secured it and grabbed the beer. When he turned around Sue was half undressed, demurely hanging her wet clothes on a small bush. He stood looking at her, his passion rising.

“Well...” she said. “You gonna let them dry on or off?”

Like teenagers, they held each others naked body, kissing hard, thrashing around on the hot sand. Hawk tried several times to penetrate her but she was very adept at deflecting that opportunity. She grabbed him with her hand.

“Come on,” he pleaded.

She giggled. “Try this,” she said and began stroking him with her hand.

That was the first of many meetings. It laid the foundation for both divorces.

What if she never came over again? How would I feel about it? Put the pluses and minus's on a T-sheet and see the result. Plus: she's pretty, sexy, intelligent, fun to be with. Minus: lousy family, argumentative, distrustful, petty, can't handle money worth a damn. Hell—that gives her more minus' then pluses.

He heard the door open and the squeak in the 3rd step coming up to the 2nd floor. He opened one eye and looked down the hallway. Nothing. He heard rustling of clothing and then the streetlight shining through the window fell on her body as she came through the open door. It was a body to behold for a woman who had given birth to three kids.

He could feel his loins strengthening and he gave no more thought to whether he could or could not perform again.

At 5:30, or 0530 by the clock he awoke and started to the kitchen. From the door to his bedroom and down the hall to the landing the woman's clothes were scattered. He stepped on her bra with his bare foot and realized it was padded. He hadn't noticed that. Course he never undressed her anymore. She took care of that.

He dumped a damp load of clothes into the dryer then opened the cupboard and took out the Rogaine. Standing in front of a full length mirror on the wall he smeared it on his head with his left hand while the other pulled the refrigerator door open and poured a cup of V8 juice. The light was not that good but he could follow the thinning rows of blond hair as he tilted his head toward the mirror. He noted also the grey bags under his eyes—nonexistent four years ago, a gift from this deal that was now coming to a climax. He took a body builders pose, flexed and let his eyes drift over each set of muscles; the tightened abs showed a fine line of demarcation from his rib cage, his arms and shoulder muscles tight and traceable to their connecting joints. He was reasonably happy with what the new weight lifting regimen was doing for him. Then he upended a paper cup of vitamins into his mouth and flushed them down with three swallows.

The window framed the backyard, lushly planted with native and exotic flora starting their first bloom of the year; the hot tub was a late addition to the big house that sat on the only hill in Rapid City overlooking the river. It was the only house in town he had lusted for. He had driven by it a hundred times, watched the owners grow old, saw the property deteriorate, planned and hoped how he would acquire it. Now that he owned it, he had halted the deterioration, added some to the landscaping. It was a financial drain

the last three years and only his equity, which he kept borrowing against, was keeping him afloat financially.

He smiled. He should have been sitting in a rocking chair mostly blind and barely able to walk with his damaged back. At age fifty he could have spent the rest of his life being looked after by one of his sons in the big house beside the Sturgis River. But cataract surgery was a wonderful thing—it restored his vision to 20-20 and a neurosurgeon installed titanium discs between his deteriorated backbones.

That he could walk and see now was a blessing he thought about every day. In his life there had not been much time for self-analysis, other than a scratch moment or two before dawn. Born on a poor ranch in the scablands of Eastern Washington, he had worked hard from dawn to dark all his life. All things were laid out as soon as he was old enough to understand tasks in relation to daylight hours. Even before daylight he milked the cow, gathered the eggs, fed the chickens, and ran the milk through the separator. When it was light enough he could do regular farm work, mend fence, chase down cattle that had gotten out, cut fire wood, repair equipment and do school work.

There were folks who had more time than money who analyzed people's lives and they had told him more times than he cared to remember, that he was the skip generation. His grandfather—tough as rawhide—had talent and drive. It was what was left of the ranch his grandfather had established, that his father, stepmother, stepbrother, stepsister, and he lived and worked themselves to death on.

The good land was gone. Sold off to pay his fathers gambling debts, personal errors of judgment and flagrant misunderstanding of how the formation of capital and the use of money functioned in the world in general and in one's family life in particular.

His father would have at one time been considered a ‘coupon clipper’; one who’s forebearers had left enough wealth for the family to invest and receive monthly checks. Even through the depression of the late 1930’s his family had lived comfortably. He had not known that time; only this time and he had vowed to not just survive, but to prosper like his grandfather.

Every time he pulled an egg from under a clucking hen, stacked a chunk of fire wood, lifted a bucket of milk, or drove a staple into a fence post, he vowed that he would rise above this; would live in the best house in town; drive the best car; that he would match and then exceed his grandfather.

It was almost dawn on Monday, June 8, 1998. He stood barefoot in the kitchen, looking out at the bubbling spa in the backyard and about to start the 1258th day of work on a \$400 million dollar real estate transaction. His name was Hawkins Neilson and upstairs asleep in his bed waiting for the sun to rise was Sue Diggs, the most expensive mistress in Jefferson County.

He lifted the phone and dialed a number from memory. Slim and Reba Collins would be awake by now, having their morning coffee and listening to the stock reports. In the southeast corner of Jefferson County, on a chunk of ground that leaned up against the Coburg Mountains, they farmed some 600 acres and ran cattle over the remaining 3,200 acres that had been homesteaded by Colonel Rhett Collins in 1878.

“Morning Slim. You ready to trade for that six hundred forty acres today? We gotta close it up this week or Fish and Game is gonna back off the deal—and you know—we’re never sure of the Indians.”

A slow voice scarred by fifty years of cigarette smoking came over the phone.

“Hawk—you didn’t even let me finish my morning coffee.” He held the phone away from him and coughed.

“Me and the wife been talking it over. We aren’t gonna do the deal. That six hundred forty is nothin but rocks and rattlesnakes. That’s why the government still owns it and it wasn’t in the original homestead. It’s just not worth the prime riverfront you’re wanting us to trade for it. What I really want is some of that high meadowland up on Buffalo Lake. Get me an acre for acre trade of that and I could get interested.”

There he goes again. Hawk dropped his head, his brain in gear for an answer. The signal on the clothes dryer squawked and he walked into the utility room to shut it off.

“Slim—you know and I know that they’re not goin to bust into that park and cut you out some lakefront. It would make an inholding that they don’t have now and it wouldn’t straighten out their boundary line or solve their problem.”

“Well...” Slim hesitated. “We’re just not in the mood to make it easy for them. The sons-a-bitches have been makin it hard for me for twenty-five years.”

Hawk took a deep breath. “Slim—don’t say no just yet. Hang in there with me on this and I’ll get something you like better but I need time—ok?”

“I got time till I die then you’ll have to deal with the wife and kids and they’ll be a damn sight tougher than I am.”

“I’ll get something—soon.” He pulled the hot clothes out of the dryer and laid them across the washer, a chair, a small table.

“That’s what you’ve been saying for more’n three years now Hawk. Don’t those people have any sense of when to get things done?”

“Some do. But I’m fighting a whole bureaucracy you know.”

“Yeah I know. Fight the good fight. I’ll be hayin’ down on the low land this week so don’t bother callin’ me until Friday. And drop down here next time you’re in the area, we’ll hoist a few and talk man talk.”

Hawk heard another cough and then the phone rattled in the cradle. “Dammit, dammit, dammit!” He slammed his fist on the counter.

Hawk showered, dressed, took a quick glance at Sue lying in the bed with the sheet tucked under her arm. How could she sleep when this deal was unraveling every day? He left his shoes off until he got to the garage, grabbed his keys and let the car ease down the driveway until it was well away from the house before he let the clutch out and started it on compression.

7:15 a.m. Monday, June 8, 1998

His usual booth was waiting for him at Ella’s Café, a relic of the gold rush logging days complete with a screen door with holes in it and a spring that pulled the thing shut against the frame. The smell of diesel truck fumes from the street and bacon frying inside vied for dominance as he slid in on the red plastic seat broken down by the weight of big men for twenty years. He opened the Spokane Review, checked the track scores then threw the paper on the table. The waitress slipped a cup of coffee to him as she passed and said “Usual?” Hawk nodded.

Going over the conversation with Slim he tried to think of anything he had left out, anything that would make a reasonable swap for Slim other than the high meadowland he wanted.

Hell—he wouldn't give up riverfront for that inholding either, but BLM insisted it was a fair trade, their appraisers had said so and they were sticking to it. Sitting in Boise in an office supplied by the government, driving a government car, with a government credit card—what did they know of a rancher's daily bargain with the land?

“Morning Hawk,” a familiar voice burst through his thoughts.

Hawk turned to see Carroll Swenson, president of Wesco Bank, standing beside the booth. “Hello Carroll.”

“Wish you'd drop by the bank as soon as you're done here.”

Hawk looked up at him with a question in his eyes.

“Why don't you come to the back door around 9:00 o'clock? I'd like to talk to you as soon as possible.”

The waitress brought Hawk's breakfast and slid it across the table with one hand while she poured him more coffee with the other. “Morning Carroll,” she said. “You got any financing for boats?”

“What kind of boats?”

“River boats. Those things cost several thousand now days.”

“Sure. You buyin' one for Carl when he retires to keep him out of your hair?”

“Just five days a week,” she laughed.

“Sure. We'll finance it if you give us all your tips for payment.”

“That'd take a hundred years.”

“Not from what I see you pick up.” Carroll’s eyes narrowed. “Do you report those to the IRS?”

“Just yours. You’re the only one who keeps track of what you leave.”

She moved on.

“You having breakfast?” Hawk said.

Carroll picked up the discarded paper, folded it and put it under his arm. “I did.”

“Why don’t you just sit down and tell me what you want here and now?”

Carroll glanced around. “I’d rather do it in my office.”

Hawk turned the eggs over and covered them with black pepper. “I’ll be by.”

Carroll wrinkled his nose, “I couldn’t eat like that,” he said, and turned to leave.

Hawk finished eating in seven minutes while his mind drifted over the possibilities of what the banker wanted to talk about.

He and Carroll went back a long ways. Being a year younger than Hawk, Carroll had always had a bit of trouble playing with the big boys but by high school he had fleshed out enough to handle the end spot on the football team, shot well enough to be a basketball forward and was fast enough to run a fair 880. They had lost touch when Hawk had gone to agricultural college and Carroll traipsed off to the University of Oregon, took business courses and after graduation started working for a small bank in Bend, Oregon.

But as strange as this world is, when Hawk wanted to start a second bank in town to rival the one that thought they had preemptive rights to every dollar that flowed through Rapid City, he went looking for a bank president who could pull in local deposits because he could talk their language and would have their full faith and trust. He found

Carroll, who had progressed up the corporate ladder to senior vice president, whose wife was longing to get back to Rapid City, and whose kids would be a reasonable asset to the high school sports program. He made him an offer he couldn't refuse.

Title—President, and all the glory that goes with it, a five year contract with extensions if it worked well, a salary that would put him in the upper two percent of the population in Jefferson County, and an option on enough bank stock to allow him to retire when he was sixty-five if it went well. Hawk never discussed or even thought about it not going well. Carroll thought about it all the time.

Hawk stopped at the cashier on the way out, where over the intervening years of his life, Jessie Hahn had gone from a comely eighteen-year-old cheerleader to a comfortable, chubby, pleasant, know-everybody-and-their-business cashier.

“Morning Hawk. Cash or credit?” she said.

“Put it on my account will you Jessie?”

“Sure.” She pulled out the credit book, opened a page and ran her finger down the column. Her finger stopped and she looked up. “Ella’s gonna want some payment on it pretty soon. It’s getting up there.”

“Yeah—I know.”

She took a pen and wrote the numbers.

He pushed the screen door open and stepped out on the sidewalk. His gaze fell on a logging truck stopped at the red light, loaded with twenty-five to thirty small trees, their tops no more than six inches in diameter. The air was colored with diesel fumes.

Pecker poles. Was it true that all the high quality trees were cut out of Jefferson County? When he was in high school the trucks often had only two or three logs for a load.

7:45 a.m. Monday, June 8, 1998

Hawk opened the door to Jefferson County Realty and smiled at the mounted game heads on the wall, the morning light reflecting from their glass eyes. He tilted his head and ran his eyes over each mount, recalling the hunt, the stalk, the shot. Thirty years of his life were represented on the wall and he wanted to never forget the days in the field. He relived the hunts to keep them fresh in his memory, to not forget the sights and sounds and smells of standing in the backcountry alone, shivering in the cold dawn, listening to the bugle of a bull elk, watching the smoke of his breath in the frozen air or turning to hear rock tumble from sheep climbing out of a deep canyon. He had pitted his two legs against their four, his powder and lead against their sense of hearing and smell and had won often enough to have a fine head collection. And he had not been a wastrel with the meat or hides. The meat was eaten, if not by him and his family, by others who needed it, and the hides tanned and given to Indians on the reservation who manufactured items from them to sell.

“Mornin’ beasts,” he said.

The mounted heads were mute.

He walked to his desk and flicked on the voice mail.

“First message: Mr. Neilson, this is David Bires calling. I’m a field representative for the Internal Revenue Service in the Boise office. We have some concerns regarding your reported sale of a house in your 1996 returns and just as a housekeeping item, we’d like to audit your books for the last three years. This is just a superficial audit to try and get a feeling for your income and expenses. We’d like to be there Wednesday if that’s a good time for you. You can reach me at...”

Hawk shook his head. He listened to the other messages and then cleared them. He stood up, closed his eyes, stretched his head back over his shoulders until he felt his back pop. He usually got two or three pops as the discs slid back and then he could stand and think straight.

At 8:00 a.m. Wev and RuthAnn came in with sixteen ounce Lattes in hand.

“Morning brother,” Wev said.

Hawk looked at him. “What’s this brother stuff?”

“RuthAnn said a lot of people didn’t know we were brothers and I should take to calling you that more often.”

Hawk glanced at RuthAnn opening up her desk for the day. She had once been pretty but the addition of forty pounds hadn’t done her body any good although it did smooth out her face.

“Well—being a step brother doesn’t mean the same thing and I don’t see any reason for you to go around town calling me brother. Sounds like some sort of black man’s game, and RuthAnn shouldn’t—.”

RuthAnn burst in. “When’s the deal gonna close Hawk?”

Damn her! She knows the closing date as well as anyone.

“This week. Got to. Too much hanging on it,” he shot back.

Hawk slammed the door behind him and jaywalked across the street, down the alley and knocked on the back door of the bank. He saw Carroll Swenson turn, smile, get up from his leather chair and start for the door.

A woodpecker was working on the mulberry tree behind the Sandstone Bar and the sound mingled with the smells from the garbage cans pulled out in the alley. This alley hadn't changed its smell in twenty years. It took Hawk right back to Junior High when he walked through it on his way home.

There was the little pocket behind the garbage cans between the Bar and Shakey's Pizza Parlor where he had hid on initiation night while the seniors were searching out the freshmen. That was the first time in his life he could remember being frightened. Tales of being left naked fifteen miles out in the country and being forced to walk back to town or having to smoke an entire cigarette inhaling every puff until you puked your dinner up, pervaded the freshman class, and while no one actually knew anybody who had had to do these things, it was assumed that someone in their class would.

“Thanks for coming in Hawk. Just need a few minutes.”

Carroll led into the conference room, closed the door slowly and quietly with both hands.

“Looks like it's gonna be a nice day...” Carroll started, then trailed off.

“Nice enough,” Hawk said.

Carroll had his hands on the tabletop with the fingers interlaced. He looked at them in silence for a moment before looking up. Hawk had seen that same look a hundred times in history class when the teacher asked him a question he couldn't answer.

“Hawk—you need to do something for me on your line of credit. The board meeting is coming up Thursday night and they're gonna insist on some action on it.” He took a quick breath and continued. “You haven't made a payment on it for over four months and from what I hear around town your credit at the store and cafe are about to be closed. When's this deal gonna close?”

“Carroll—I need time.”

“Dammit Hawk, I've loosened every screw, every binder that's available to me but they won't let me keep ignoring this loan. It is a sizeable amount for our bank you know?”

“Look—Carroll—I worked my ass off getting this bank in here. Got depositor's—big ones to switch banks and help open this place. And I got you out of that lousy bank in Bend to run it. Now I need some help. Time is all I need. When this deal closes my fee alone will double the capital of the bank.”

“That much?” Carroll watched Hawk nodding. “How much?”

“It will double your capital.”

Carroll looked out the window. “You mean we'd have close to fifty million?”

Hawk nodded again.

Carroll took a deep breath, bent his head back and looked at the ceiling. His lips were pursed and the tips of his fingers had turned white.

“Ok. I'll tell them we need to extend for another—what—ninety days?”

“That’s plenty.”

“You’re sure you can pay the full \$120,000 by then?”

They both nodded.

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