

DOUBLE TROUBLE

by

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PROLOGUE

At three o'clock in the morning, a sharp rap vibrated the window of Tonia Stowell's bedroom. She moaned, rolled over and pulled the covers over her head. After the celebration of her twenty-eighth birthday at the Saddle Horn with a group of friends, she felt the agony of consuming too much champagne. When the second knock rattled the glass, she forced her eyes open and tried to raise her head.

"Tonia, wake up," called a harsh male voice.

"Who the hell?" She threw back the covers and struggled to get up. Glancing at the clock, she cursed. "Damn, I've only been asleep an hour."

She eased out of bed and clutched her head. Wrapping her robe around her nude body, she staggered toward the window and peered out.

"Dear God, what does he want?" she muttered, motioning for him to go around to the front door.

Her cat, Cyclone, leaped off the bed and followed Tonia into the living room where she opened the front door only as far as the chain allowed. "Drew Harland, do you know what time it is?"

His slate blue eyes met her stare. "Yeah, dammit. But I need your help."

She sighed, unlocked the safety chain and threw open the door. Folding her arms across her chest, she stepped back and glared at him as he entered, then slammed the door shut with her foot "This better be good, waking me at this ungodly hour."

"I'm in trouble. You've gotta help me."

Tonia marched over to the glass topped coffee table and picked up a pack of cigarettes. She sat down on the brocade velour couch and crossed her legs, revealing a shapely tanned thigh through the slit of her silk robe. After lighting her cigarette, she leaned back on the couch and blew a circle of smoke into the air. "What kind of trouble?"

Drew ran a nervous hand through his crop of blond hair. "Bad. Coty and I robbed The First National Bank on the edge of town and he killed the security guard."

She narrowed her jade eyes. "You fools!"

He ducked his head. "Yeah, I know. And to top it off, we noticed a damn video camera perched on the eaves, probably got the whole thing on tape. It'll only be a matter of time before the cops find us."

Tonia put her cigarette on the lip of the crystal ashtray and stepped into the kitchen. She mixed herself a stiff Jack Daniels and water, then carried it back into the living room. Sitting down, she flipped the ash from her cigarette. "How much did you get?"

"Close to a hundred grand."

A slight smile curled the edges of her mouth as she took a sip from the glass. "Where is it?"

He flopped down on an overstuffed chair opposite her and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his thighs. "In a safe-deposit box."

"So what the hell do you want me to do?"

He dug into his pocket, pulling out a gold-toned piece of metal. "I gotta get out of the state, but I'll give you a cut if you'll keep this key until the heat dies down."

Tonia crushed out her cigarette and stood. Untying her robe, she sauntered toward him, the silk material flowing open, revealing firm breasts and curved hips. He stood, his eyes wide as she took the key from his hand and slowly wrapped her arms around his neck. "Sugar, I'll keep this in a nice, safe place for you. Anything else you need?"

CHAPTER ONE

Private Investigator, Tom Casey, better known as Hawkman to friends and family, hurried down the Medford court house steps and jumped into his truck. As he drove down the street, he loosened his bolo tie, undid the top button of his shirt and let out a sigh. Nice to breath freely again, he thought, turning into his usual parking space in front of the Donut Shop.

He bought a chocolate covered pastry, then sprinted up the narrow stairwell to his office. When he reached the door, he could hear the phone ringing while he fumbled for his key. By the time he stepped inside, the answering machine had already picked up and a sobbing female voice echoed throughout the room.

“Mr. Casey, my name’s Nancy Gilbert. I need your help. My sister’s been murdered.”

Hawkman listened with interest while hanging up his suit coat and pouring himself a cup of coffee. He snapped up his eye-patch and rubbed his eyes with his fingers. The injury he’d received while working for the Agency was still sensitive to light. He flipped the patch back into place, turned on the desk light and punched the replay button, this time jotting down the information. Rolling his shoulders, he dialed the woman’s number, then leaned back in his chair. “Nancy Gilbert?”

“Yes.”

“Tom Casey returning your call.”

He sensed a worried woman from the short silence that ensued. “Mr. Casey, I need to meet with you. Is there some place we can go other than your office?”

“Sure.” Hawkman knew some first-time clients preferred meeting in a public place rather than a private investigator’s office. “How about Rimmer’s Coffee Shop in the Medford Center?”

“That’s perfect. How will I know you?”

He studied the coat rack. “I’ll have on a dark brown leather jacket and a cowboy hat. I have a black eye patch, so you won’t have any trouble spotting me.”

“I’ll be there in thirty minutes,” she said, and hung up.

Hawkman pulled open the bottom desk drawer and removed his shoulder holster with the Colt .45. He felt naked without it, but weapons weren’t allowed in the court rooms. After buckling the holster around his large chest, he opened another drawer and removed a small recorder no bigger than a pager. He replaced the batteries then clipped it to his belt. Shrugging into his leather jacket, he plopped on his hat and left.

Fifteen minutes later, he strolled into the small coffee shop where the scent of brewed coffee and freshly baked pastries wafted through the air. After a quick survey of the patrons, satisfied that his prospective client hadn’t arrived, he took an empty booth against the far wall.

He kept his eye on the door and it wasn’t long before a tall, slender woman dressed in a blue suit entered the shop. Her blond hair had been artfully braided into a French roll and tendrils clung around her face, giving her an elegant appearance. She slipped off her sunglasses and glanced around the room. When she spotted him, he tipped his hat and watched her approach.

“Mrs. Gilbert?”

“Yes.”

Hawkman stood as she slipped into the booth. He noticed that her chin quivered slightly and the perfectly applied make-up didn’t conceal the ravages of recent tears. He wondered how emotional this encounter might be,

especially after a ragged sigh escaped her lips. But before he had a chance to ask any questions, a waitress appeared.

Nancy clutched the purse in her lap, then glanced up at the woman. "Just black coffee, please."

Hawkman nodded. "Same here."

After the waitress left, he placed the small voice activated recorder on the table. "I hope you don't mind. I find this much easier than taking notes."

Her green eyes narrowed. "I don't want anyone else to know what I tell you."

"What is said between a client and myself is strictly confidential. But if it bothers you, I won't use it." He started to remove the recorder from the table, but she waved him off.

"No, it's okay. I'm just scared and nervous right now."

He studied her face. "Why are you scared?"

Tears filled her eyes. "I think my ex-husband killed my sister and is coming after me next."

Hawkman shifted in his seat. "Why don't you start at the beginning."

She dabbed her eyes with a tissue and took a deep breath. "Nine years ago I married a man named Drew Harland. Shortly afterwards, he robbed a bank and was convicted for armed robbery and sentenced to twelve years in prison. I divorced him." She paused a moment and stared blankly at the recorder. Then she took another ragged breath and continued. "He swore he'd kill me. Since that time, I've kept my whereabouts a secret."

Hawkman frowned, not understanding how any of this had a bearing on the murder. "That still doesn't explain why you think he killed your sister."

Nancy glanced at him. "I think he went to Tonia's house to find me. When she refused to tell him where I lived, he probably got angry and killed her." She shook her head and murmured. "He has a violent temper."

“When and where was your sister killed?”

“Last week, inside her home in Los Angeles.”

He furrowed his brow. “How could your ex have done this if he’s in jail?”

“He got out early on good behavior. I didn’t know he’d been released until I flew down to Los Angeles to make the positive identification of my sister’s body. I found a note in her purse reminding herself to let me know.” She rummaged through her own purse. “I have it here someplace.” Her voice broke. “She was only thirty-seven years old.”

Hawkman held up a hand. “You don’t have to find it, I’ll take your word. Do the police suspect your ex-husband?”

“No.”

“Did you tell them about your suspicion?”

“No, because I hadn’t discovered the note until after I talked with them. But putting together the information they gave me, I knew it had to be Drew.”

Hawkman leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table. “How’s that?”

“Her house had been methodically searched. He must have been looking for my address.” She glanced at him. “But he’d never find it.”

“Why not?”

“My letters to Tonia went to a Post Office box. After reading them, she destroyed any evidence of having heard from me and she never kept anything in her house that applied to my family, just in case Drew came looking.”

“Then how did the authorities find you?”

“Tonia had given one of her neighbor’s my husband’s office phone number in case of an emergency. Then Jack relayed the message to me.”

Hawkman again, shifted in his seat. “Mrs. Gilbert, while you were in Los Angeles, do you think your ex might have spotted you?”

She shot him a startled look. “Dear God, I didn’t even think about that.”

He rubbed his hand across his chin. “How long were you there?”

“Only a few hours. I flew down early in the morning and came back home that same afternoon.”

“Did you make the funeral arrangements?”

She shook her head. “No. The police won’t release her body for another week.”

Hawkman leaned back and folded his arms across his chest. “Okay. So what is it you want of me?”

“Protection for my family. I fear for my husband, Jack and our four year old daughter, Tracy. Drew is terribly jealous and very possessive. I felt safe with him behind bars, but now . . .” Her voice trailed as she dabbed her eyes.

He stared at her a moment, thinking how this situation would more than likely involve the police, which sometimes made things pretty damned complicated, especially working two states. “If I take the case, I’ll need some background information. Also, if it means investigating your sister’s murder, I’ll need her full name.”

“Tonia Sarah Stowell.”

“Also, your ex-husband’s full name.”

“Drew Lawrence Harland.”

The name struck a familiar cord and Hawkman tightened his jaw , trying to recall if he’d run into him on one of his many undercover jobs as an agent? He’d check into it later. “What type of employment did he hold before conviction?”

“Odd jobs. But most of the time he followed the rodeo circuit.”

Hawkman jerked back in surprise. “The rodeo?”

“Yes. He competed in the bull riding events.” Her eyes were cast downward as she twisted a strand of blond hair around her finger.

He nodded. “Interesting. How long were you married?”

“Five years of pure hell.”

“You mentioned he had a violent temper.”

She shuttered. “He’d beat me over nothing. It was a relief when he went to prison.”

“He’s had plenty of time to think things out. Maybe he’s changed.”

She folded her hands on the table and narrowed her eyes. “He isn’t the forgiving sort.”

“Tell me about your present family. What’s your husband’s name and his profession?”

“Jack Gilbert. He’s a lawyer.”

“No middle name?”

“No.”

“And how long have you two been married?”

“Six years.”

So now we have a lawyer and an ex-con. Quite an interesting combination, he thought. This could be intriguing. “I’d like to set up a meeting with you and your husband, so we can set up some surveillance strategy.”

Nancy stiffened, her eyes wide. “Jack knows nothing about me wanting to hire a private investigator.”

Hawkman raised a brow. “Mrs. Gilbert, this isn’t going to be a pleasant situation if Drew comes looking for you. I think your husband should know.”

The corners of her mouth drew down in a frown. “Why can’t I hire you without Jack’s knowing?” She opened her purse. “I’ll give you a five thousand dollar retainer check today.”

He held up his hands. “That’s not the point. You can certainly hire me without Jack knowing. But I’d like his cooperation if I’m going to watch your house and especially your daughter. How do you think he’d react if he spotted some stranger tailing Tracy? Or himself, for that matter?”

“But. . .”

Sensing people were watching, Hawkman leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Look, things would be a lot less complicated if he's informed."

She wrote the check and slid it across the table. "I'll think about telling him."

Hawkman fingered the slip of paper and stared at her for a moment, wondering how much Jack Gilbert knew about her past. "Give me a call so I'll know how to proceed."

She slipped from the booth and stood for a moment as if she wanted to say more. Instead, she slowly turned and walked away.

Hawkman watched her go, then took a sip of his coffee, grimacing at the cold bitter taste. He set the cup down and drummed his fingers on the table, thinking about what she'd told him. So far as she knew, the LAPD didn't suspect her ex, but that would change after he talked to them.

He slipped the recorder into his pocket and picked up the tab. While walking across the parking lot toward his 4X4, he spotted Nancy Gilbert drive out the exit in a silver Mercedes.

While unlocking his truck, he fished out his cellular phone from his pocket, then climbed inside. He'd give Stan a call. See if he could get some information on Drew Lawrence Harland.

Stan Erwin and Kevin Louis were two retired police officers Hawkman hired to assist him on complicated cases. They both volunteered at the police station and had access to their computers. He punched in the number. Stan's deep voice boomed in his ear.

"Stan, Hawkman here."

"Hey, good to hear from you. What's up?"

"I need you to run a check on Drew Lawrence Harland, released from prison sometime in the last two weeks."

"Okay, give me a second."

Hawkman could hear the drone of the computer going through its steps, then Stan came back on the line. "Okay, got it. Boy, looks like you're getting ready to tangle with a turkey. Got a rap sheet a mile long. Been in and out of jail on DUI's, public disturbances, wife battery charges, the list goes on. His last stretch was for armed robbery. Released early, a week ago Tuesday, for good behavior." Stan's tongue clicked in disgust. "Damn, can you beat that? So what's brewing with this character?"

Keeping his eye on the road, Hawkman weaved through the traffic with his cellular to his ear. "Have a client who's involved with him. Thought I recognized the name but still can't place him. How old is he?"

"Thirty-eight. Six foot, blond hair, blue eyes, 180 pounds and missing most of the little finger on his left hand."

"Fax that info along with his picture. Maybe that will stir my memory."

"It's on the way."

"Thanks, Stan."

When Hawkman reached his office, he immediately retrieved the fax and studied the face. The man looked familiar, but he still couldn't place him. He put it aside, hoping the memory would come to him eventually.

In a dimly lit bar, two brothers sat in a booth facing one another.

"You just got out of jail, for Christ sakes. Don't be stupid. Don't do this."

"Then help me, David. I've got to find Nancy."

"Call Tonia. She'd know."

"I already did. The bitch wouldn't tell me anything." Drew leaned back in his seat and looked around. "Man, this seedy hole ain't changed in ten years. Same old red paint on the walls, same old hanging bar lights that look like

they've got ten years of dirt on em. Doesn't look like they've done a damned thing to the joint since I was in here the last time." He snorted and took a big gulp of beer, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

David's steel blue gaze narrowed on his brother. "You've been on edge for the last couple of days. What's eaten' at ya?"

"Nothin'." Drew wouldn't meet his brother's stare, instead he glanced around the room and raised a brow at one of the waitresses. "Wow, what a babe. Man oh man, bet she's somethin' in bed."

David sighed. "You ain't changed a bit."

Drew finally turned his eyes from the bosomy waitress. "Look, brother." He slammed his fist on the table. "I've gotta find Nancy."

"What the hell for? She's done with you. Can't you get that through your thick head?"

Drew laced his fingers behind his head and stretched back against the booth. "Hell no. She's still mine. She just don't know it."

David let out a disgusted breath. "You're crazy, man."

"So, you ain't gonna help me find her?"

"No way," David said emphatically and got up to leave. "I want no part of it."