



### **Dove Connelly's Bedroom** **2:17 a.m.**

Dove Connelly caught up the phone on the first ring even though it was set so low as to make the sound virtually mute. Any other human being in a deep sleep wouldn't have heard it, but Dove wasn't any one else.

First, he didn't sleep all that deep anymore. Then there was the thing he had in him: it was his sixth sense that let him hear and see what others didn't, anticipate what others couldn't.

Most people respected his talent, some thanked God for it and others who weren't so law abiding steered clear of it. His wife, Cherie, would swear that she would be forever faithful because he would know her intentions even before she strayed. But that was before the unthinkable happened. Now, if Cherie spoke of that sixth sense at all, she did so with regret, sad that the gift had forsaken Dove when they needed it most.

Tonight Dove's wife didn't move when he pushed aside the covers and got out of bed. He put the phone to his ear, padding along to the kitchen in bare feet, wearing only old sweat pants, having no inkling that he'd be putting on his uniform any time soon.

"What is it, Jessica? Hogan boys tear up the tavern again?" He kept his voice low. The house wasn't big.

Jessica Taylor started to speak but all Dove heard was the news catching in her throat. In all the years he had known her, Jessica reported to him using a scale of verbal sorrow, outrage or downright disbelief that gave him a clue as to enormity of the crime that was waiting on him. This night, for a layer of a second, she was speechless. Dove's blood ran cold; as cold as it had run all those months ago when another crime was over and done before he knew it had even begun.

"Talk to me, Jessica."

"Oh God, it's a bad 'un. Bad as anything." The woman pulled in a breath and it went no further than the middle of her chest.

"What and where?"

"One of ours, Dove. Paddy Johnson was drivin' home, saw the lights at the Mountain Store and figured Fritz was hostin' one of his poker parties like he used to." Jessica

breathed deep again and this time it went all the way in to her gut. "Paddy stopped into the store thinking to pick up a hand, Dove. He went into the store and found Fritz dead. Head splattered all over the back room. I'm so sorry."

"Ah, Jesus."

Dove put a hand to his face. There were no words to express Dove's shock and sorrow. Bowing his head, covering his eyes did not make this news easier to take. They were talking about Fritz, a jack-o-lantern of a man: solid, round, possessed of a smile that cracked his face in two and lit up even the darkest times.

Dove remembered Fritz passing hot coffee to him on a bitter morning. Dove could still hear Fritz's good words even when there was nothing good in his own life to speak of. Fritz was Dove's best friend and confessor, the only one who knew what had really gone on in the sheriff's home. Fritz was fond of reminding the sheriff that he carried the spirit of the bird his mother had named him for. Dove. Peace. Fritz had tried so hard to help Dove make peace with his demons.

Now Fritz was gone and Dove was shamed he slept through the man's dying. That he didn't feel his friend's need was as close to a sin as anything he could imagine. There would come a time for personal reckoning. The time wasn't now. Now was the time for Dove to do his job.

"Where's Paddy?" Dove asked flatly.

"Says he's sittin' in his truck waitin' on you. He called from the store but didn't want to stay inside." There was a beat before Jessica asked: "Want me to let the state boys know?"

"Give them a call but I'm not waiting on them, Jessie."

"Alright, Dove."

"Ring up Tim and get him out there. Call Nathan, too."

"You going to trust Nathan with this?" Jessica asked tentatively.

"I trust him, Jessica. You make the call," Dove directed. Then he thought again. "And Bernadette. We've got to let Bernadette know."

"I'll see to it, Dove," Jessica offered but he had already changed his mind.

"Never mind. Not yet. I'll go out to the store first. There's always a chance Paddy is wrong." Dove clutched for something that would make this better. The straw he came up with was speculation. It was a short one, a ridiculous dodge, but it was what he had. "Besides, if Bernadette's awake she'll know something's gone down. Can't be as close as those two have been all these years and not know."

Jessica murmured something Dove couldn't quite catch. It sounded like 'hallelujah'. He was about to ring off when she stopped him.

"Dove, you think he could have done it himself? I mean, it's been hard on him with Bernadette and all."

"No," he snapped. "Fritz wouldn't have left us with that on our mind."

"You're right," Jessica agreed. "You just do what you've got to do, Dove. I'll be by the phone ready to help with whatever you need."

"Jessie?"

"Yep?"

"Lock your doors. Keep your eyes open. Is your gun loaded?"

"Dove, whoever did this is probably gone. Besides, I can take ca. . ."

"You do it, Jessica," Dove snapped. "One friend gone is enough. I won't have another."

Dove rang off. He kept his thoughts so close there wasn't room for his huge sorrow. He dressed in the near dark, the small light in the bathroom casting only the faintest glow. Cherie saw that his uniform was laundered good as any city cop. She reasoned that if Dove's size didn't make people think twice before coming down on him, his starched and pressed uniform would. Even in these big mountains where so much law was made just by two people meeting up together, a fine uniform made a difference.

Dove put his gun in his holster and his jacket on over that. He slipped his knife into its sheath and took his hat off the peg. It was only when he went to kiss his sleeping wife that he paused.

Cherie was a powerful draw and it used to be he couldn't be in the same room without wanting to touch her. Yet, her brow was furrowed as she struggled inside her dreams and it caught him up short. Those dreams were a place Dove didn't want to go - he couldn't help even if he got there - so he reached out and put his hand on her head. It didn't ease her worry. It was a bad night all around.

Dove stepped back but the bassinette was in his way and he was forced to look at the baby. The girl's eyes were open. Big eyes still blue from birth even though four months had passed. He prayed they would change dark like his and Cherie's. Maybe if her eyes changed everything else would, too. But she looked up with those blue eyes without seeing him; Dove turned away as if he couldn't see her.

One of the cats stretched when he took the keys to the car. Its yellow eyes followed him as he stepped into the small room off the kitchen. A basket of cleanly folded laundry sat atop the washer. It smelled of baby powder and pink cream. The scent made Dove gag but it didn't stop him from staying long enough to check the security control panel.

The lights were lit green, each window and door of his house wired so that an alarm would sound at Jessica's should anyone open them without a code. The indicators for the alarm pads that were buried around the perimeter of the property pulsed red. Finally, Dove flipped on the floodlights ringing his cabin home. That done he retraced his steps and opened the back door.

Outside, Dove saw his breath and gave the black dog no more than a glance as he walked by. The creature was all muscle, pointed ears and snout. He had teeth that could rip a man to shreds. Dove swung himself into his car, fired up the engine, switched on the headlights and headed out.

It was two thirty-five in the morning.

*My name is Tessa Bradley.*

*I am, I have been told, a very beautiful woman.*

*Most men believe they would die happy if they could touch me; women have said they would kill to be me. I don't see what the fuss is all about, but then I have lived inside this skin long enough to know that life balances everything out.*

*While these looks of mine have earned me a few brass rings, there is always something on the back end to rub off the shine. Tonight that something is a gun pointing at my back. The heavy barrel drags over my spine to hurry me on. I do my best but I'm confused by the shadows as we move among the trees. I'm afraid and fear slows me even more.*

*"Bitch."*

*The muzzle hits me between the shoulder blades. I don't expect it because we've walked a fair way in silence. I fall hard to the cold ground. I play possum, wanting a minute more to figure out why I'm here, who these men are and why they hate me.*

*"Get up."*

*Boots come into view. They are thick and worn. They belong to the man with the shaved head. He is the dog who grabbed me when we met up at the front door of that general store off the highway.*

*"Get up. Get up."*

*His accent is so thick the words sound like 'giddy up'. Tired of waiting on me, he swings his boot. It connects with my gut. Swallowing my cry of surprise and terror, I roll away and cup my body around the blow. It wasn't hard enough to knock the breath out of me; it's knowing he did it that makes me sick. What he's done brings back memories.*

*"Hold your horses," I mutter.*

*I struggle to my hands and knees. I glare at him through a curtain of light hair. He doesn't see the hatred in my eyes but I know he feels it. A man no more turns his own eyes my way than I feel what he feels. Usually it is his lust stamping me like a branding iron. In another place this man might think of me that way, but here I am the enemy and I don't know why. I get to my feet. My ankle wobbles in my high-heeled boots. That sign of weakness gives the man with the gun courage.*

*For each step I take back he gets bolder and comes forward. My body convulses with fear and cold but mostly fear. An owl hoots. A wind ruffles the tops of the trees and runs over my cheek. The bright moon comes out from behind a cloud and I see a little better. A pinecone falls with a 'whump'. Neither of us turns at the sound. We only have eyes for each other even though there are three of us on this mountain: me, the man with the gun, and a younger man. That man is silent. He stops a little ways back.*

*His shoulders are slumped. His hair is long and curly. His hands stick deep in the pockets of his old coat. He seems weary but I'm not fooled. Weary only means he isn't going to put himself out one way or another. Slowly he turns his head and stares off into the darkness. His face in profile looks like a wolf gone too long without food. He leans toward the gunman, putting in his two cents in that language I don't understand.*

*The tattooed man shakes his head. Like a terrorist, his scarf hides him from the nose down. I see only the top half of his face. Shaved head. White scar through the tattoo on his temple. His small eyes skate over the six flawless carats of diamond on my left hand, my jeans, my cashmere sweater. I am a woman people will miss and that makes him nervous.*

*"What do you boys want?" There it is. The voice I thought I lost is back. I ratchet it up a notch. "Come on you bastards? What? Money?"*

*The man with the gun darts a look at his companion. The weary man smirks. He understands alright but money means nothing to him. That's downright scary. To most people, money is everything.*

*"Is this about Jake?"*

*My voice shakes. Not that it matters. They aren't interested in how I feel and they aren't inclined to answer my questions. The younger one speaks urgently, gesturing, unable to take his eyes off me now. I am not surprised. Someone once told me I'm most beautiful when I'm afraid. If that's true, I must look like a goddess because I am scared shitless.*

*The one with the gun argues with the other one, biting off his words like tough meat as his eyes flicker and his arm straightens. His knuckles go white and his finger tightens on the trigger the way my daddy's used to when he meant to shoot. The gun points at my face. My hand comes up, fingers spread wide. I always thought I didn't care about my face, but I do. If he blows my face off what will anyone remember about me? How will anyone know me?*

*Sweet Jesus.*

*I pray, even though it has been my experience that Jesus isn't paying much attention to what's happening down here on earth. A tear creeps out of the corner of my eye. Reflected there I see things: Jake and Charlotte, mug shots of my lovers, ugly truths beneath the rocks that litter the path of my life.*

*I don't want to see all of my life passing before my eyes. It's not time and I'm not ready to admit this is the end.. Understanding that, I'm not afraid anymore. Instead, I'm just friggin' ticked when I look at the ugly man square on.*

*Him and me, we make peace with our decisions at the same time. I see it in his eyes but he misses what is in mine. Bad call on his part. I scream 'no' just before I hear a click, an explosion and another scream. I feel heat and smell smoke. My shoulder is hot/cold with hurt. The dark in the mountains turns bright white. I have been blown to the ground but not to kingdom come. Half blind, I scramble up but the short one is on me.*

*I kick. I scream. The gunman's scarf pulls away giving me a glimpse of the sad excuse for a man he is: weak jawed and scarred. His teeth are bad. He is nothing but we are the same. We live by our props. Without them he is a bully and a thug. Without mine, I am nothing but a gawky piece of Texas white trash. The difference between us is this: I'm wanting to live more than he's wanting me to die.*

*The weary man is suddenly animated. He screams, too, as he dances around us. The man on top of me twirls my sweater into his fist and pulls me off the ground. He cracks me across the jaw. My lip splits. The taste of my own blood makes me crazy. I beat at him. It is then I feel something bite into my palm. My car key is still in my hand. I have me a weapon and that means I have a chance.*

*Clawing at the grip on my throat with one hand, I work the key into position with the other. Viciously I drive it into my assailant's eye. Gore and blood covers my hand and splatters my face but I don't stop. I twist the key. And twist. And twist. His howls deafen me. His hands fly up as he throws himself away.*

*He is hurt.*

*I am free.*

*He rolls on the ground.*

*I am standing. The third man bends over the first.*

*I am gone.*

*I run for my life.*

*I fear what is ahead, but I fear what is behind me even more.*

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