

DARKROOM

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Prologue

Some photographs speak for the dead, but their meaning may be elusive. You can't know for certain what's happening outside the frame or what happened before and after the image froze.

Look at these four black-and-white photographs.

In the first, a young man and woman crane their necks at the camera. They sit on a blanket with a Navajo pattern, surrounded by the remains of a picnic—bottles of Corona, a half-eaten hard roll, an open jar of Greek olives, a hunk of cheese on a board, a knife. A metal pipe used for smoking hash. In the upper edge of the frame, beyond the blanket, are meadow grasses and rangy wildflowers. Stalks and blossoms of the wildflowers are entwined in the woman's hair. They have begun to wilt.

The couple are in their early twenties, no older. The young man's head seems too big for his body. He has a round face, a snub nose, and an undersize mouth tight with disapproval—of the bothersome flies or having his picture taken, or something far worse that he would call evil. The woman's mouth, dark with lipstick, hangs open. Her forehead is creased. She gazes beyond the camera to where something has drawn her attention, pulling her out of the framed moment.

She sees it coming and is afraid.

In the next photograph, the couple are gone. A creek flows under a barbed-wire fence. The angle suggests the photographer has crouched on the bank and aimed the camera low over the water, upstream. Close up, the water is transparent down to the riverbed. Beyond the fence, shadowed by trees, the water darkens and winds across the frame, drawing your eye to the edge.

The creek in the third photograph is more narrow, rippling with current as it tumbles downhill. Another low angle, but this time the photographer aims the camera across the water and into trees. No focal point, it seems at first. But keep looking. After five seconds, maybe longer, your eye settles on a cross carved into the trunk of an aspen. The cross is several inches high yet no more prominent than the black knots and threads of lichen around it. But once seen, its wrongness stands out—the single unnatural detail in a landscape too wild to be framed. The knife cuts are fresh.

The last photograph points down at a patch of forest floor that also looks wrong in subtle ways. Pine needles are unsettled, not packed as they would be after lying together for a long time. The scattering of cones and twigs seems deliberate, like coconut sprinkled on a cake. Despite the unusual fluffiness of its cover, the ground looks sunken, as if the cake had fallen while baking. No marker distinguishes this spot from any other on the mountainside. The photographer has led you from the border into the heart of nowhere, trusting you'll care enough to follow the trail.

1

Manic whoops and a whiff of cannabis seeped into the garage. Daffy Duck was getting high. Kelly shifted a bag of groceries into the crook of her arm and opened the door. Beyond the kitchen and the sunlit dining area, Day sat on the carpet, toking on a hash pipe. An ashtray and several dishes, one piled high with orange rinds, formed a half circle in front of her.

Kelly dumped the groceries onto the counter and considered how to handle the situation. She was scared for Day, but it wouldn't help to let the fear show. She bought a minute by placing the car keys on their hook beside the door and detouring to the hall closet to hang up her coat. Then she went into the living room. "Hey, what's going on?"

Day's face froze in panic and then broke into a grin that lifted her eyebrows in exaggerated arches. A mischievous gleam lighted her eyes. A teenage girl lived inside the body of a thirty-eight-year-old woman. She held out the pipe. "Want a hit?"

Kelly shook her head. "My flight's at 9:10. And you're driving me to the airport, remember?" Her voice was drowned out by the cartoon soundtrack, a blare of horns and violins and Daffy's mocking laugh. She had to shout. "Turn off the TV."

Day fumbled the remote, aiming the wrong end and then dropping it. Finally she turned off the cartoon. The silence filled with the refrigerator's hum and the creak of bedsprings from Day's bedroom, next to the kitchen.

"Who's in there?"

"I was about to tell you. Odette's here."

"Who's with her?"

Day giggled.

"Odette gave you the hash."

"Don't be pissed."

"I'm not. It's just, you know what could—" She met Day's unfocused gaze and stopped. They could talk later. She went back to the kitchen and put the groceries away. She hesitated with the lamb shank. The plan was to show Day how to make curried lamb, but maybe not tonight. She put the meat in the fridge.

Voices from Day's room. Odette and—big surprise—a man. The door opened and Odette came out, her face haloed in Pre-Raphaelite curls. A T-shirt emblazoned with a pink butterfly showed off her breasts. "Hi, Kelly." Her boyfriend ventured out behind her. He was thin and tall, with a large head and a cherubic face. Like a lollipop. "This is Marcus."

"Marcus French," he said. "Sorry to bother you."

"No problem." Kelly put on a polite smile. "You guys are welcome to stay for dinner."

"Marcus is vegan," Odette said. "There's so much stuff he doesn't eat."

Day lurched to her feet and gathered up the dishes, stepping on the pretzel crumbs scattered over the carpet. She carried the stack into the kitchen and retrieved her camera and backpack from a chair at the dinner table.

"You're going with them?" Kelly said.

"Just taking them back to Boulder."

“You’re driving the Corolla? The brakes are shot.”

“They work. Kind of.”

Kelly grabbed her car keys. “Why don’t I take them?”

“You don’t have to. I mean, I can ...” Day’s voice trailed off and her gaze wandered.

Odette and Marcus followed Kelly to the garage and piled into the backseat of her Jeep Cherokee. She backed out of the garage. The Corolla, rust-pocked and dented, was parked at the curb in a different spot from where it had been that morning. The car was a deathtrap, but Day had no other way into town.

“This place,” Marcus said. “It’s soulless. Everything is the same. Tan brick, perfect lawns. I wonder how many trees they cut down to build this chancre on the mountainside.”

The kid wanted to start an argument.

Kelly wasn’t crazy about Ash Mountain Estates, but she couldn’t afford anything this nice closer to town. The subdivision had a social center with a gym and a pool. She drove past the basketball and tennis courts, where half a dozen players were enjoying the last hour of the bright autumn day, and then through the entrance gate—more bland brick—and onto the road.

Marcus cleared his throat. “So, Day says you’re curator of the cowboy museum.”

“Assistant curator. You going to give me shit about that, too?”

“It’s Eurocentric.”

“Not entirely. It’s not just cowboys. It’s the art of the American West, including Native American art. Plus we have community programs and shows of local artists. Day knows that.”

“Your founder is a fascist.”

Kelly laughed. “That’s harsh.” The Museum of the Rockies did somewhat reflect the worldview of J. Elroy Jorgensen, a libertarian businessman, now deceased. He might have conceived MOR as a stiff middle finger to Boulder’s progressive image, but things hadn’t quite turned out that way.

“You’re comfortable working there?”

“Damn straight,” she said in a John Wayne drawl.

Marcus looped his scrawny arm around Odette and snuggled his cheek against hers. “You’re gonna tell him, right?”

“I don’t know.” Her voice trembled a little.

“Come on, Odette. It makes me sick when I think about him with you.”

Kelly glanced at their faces in the rearview mirror, his rapt and hers frightened. Lost in each other. Sex kitten and sanctimonious vegan—one more example of the old rule that opposites attract. Only their fear seemed wrong.

The road descended into a narrow canyon and wound through foothills planted with expensive houses before intersecting Broadway at the north edge of town.

“Where can I drop you guys?”

“Downtown at the mall,” Odette said. “Take Marcus home first.”

“Just let me out here.”

“I’ll take you home.” Kelly slowed behind a line of cars waiting as students crossed the street, a stream of backpacks and bobbing heads mostly clad in baseball caps.

“This is great, thanks.” Marcus pressed his mouth against Odette’s before hopping from the Jeep and dashing to the curb as the light changed.

Kelly drove toward downtown. “What happens when your husband finds out about Marcus?”

“It’s not like he gives a shit. He’s out of town anyway.” In the mirror her eyes darkened in unhappy thought.

“Do me a favor,” Kelly said. “You know Day’s bipolar. Don’t give her drugs.”

“She can handle it sometimes. When she’s feeling centered.”

Day tried to get by without medication. For the last eight months—the time Kelly had known her—she’d been all right, but a few puffs of hash might launch her into mania and land her in the psych ward.

“Just don’t, okay?”

Near the Pearl Street mall, Odette hunkered down and peeked out the window. “Turn left at the next street. Let me out anywhere but the corner.”

“Who is it you’re hiding from?”

“My bodyguard. Stuart says it’s for my protection, but that’s bullshit. He just wants to know what I’m doing every second of the day.”

“You ditched your bodyguard?”

“In Banana Republic. I took a bunch of clothes to try on and gave the girl a twenty to let me out the back.”

Kelly spotted the bodyguard, the only person not strolling along the sidewalk or gazing into store windows. He scanned the traffic in both directions, his shoulders and chest freakishly wide in a bulky lambskin jacket. His arctic gaze stuck to the Jeep as if he sensed Odette crouched in the backseat. “Where do I let you off?”

“Around the corner.”

Kelly turned left alongside a municipal parking garage. “If Stuart doesn’t give a shit, why are you hiding?”

“I don’t know. Because I want my privacy? For once.” Under the sarcasm, her voice trembled. She was afraid of her husband. Maybe for good reason. When the Jeep stopped, she ducked out and strolled toward the garage. Reeking of hash and carrying no shopping bags. The bodyguard wouldn’t be fooled.



Day waited at the dinner table sipping chamomile tea from a Japanese cup. She filled another cup for Kelly from the matching teapot. Except for bloodshot eyes and a subtle thickness in her voice, the high seemed to have worn off.

Kelly sat facing her. "The house stinks. Couldn't you get stoned in the car?"

"Your next-door neighbor was, like, peeping out the window again. He's such a weird little dude."

Owen worked at home and looked for things to complain about. Like Day's Corolla. He called it an eyesore. But Kelly wasn't in the mood to poke fun at Owen. "You know what can happen if you get stoned."

"It was just a couple tokes. I'm stable."

"That could change in a split second."

Eyes lowered, Day traced the ideogram on her cup with her forefinger. "I've never had a friend like you. And I don't wanna fuck it up. I mean, it's just sometimes like I don't know what's normal. What's okay with normal people?"

Help me to be better, teach me. Day had made the same appeal before, several times, the reliable key to Kelly's sympathy. Manipulative but also honest. She was only asking for what she needed.

"I'm not a dooper," she went on. "Like, how many times have I gotten high? Twice on grass. Maybe a dozen times on booze. My thing is making photographs, not being strung out."

"No more drugs, then."

"Okay."

Kelly couldn't let go of an uneasiness that covered more than the drugs, but she didn't want to talk about the hulking bodyguard and the fear in Odette's voice. Not now anyway. "Are you up for helping me make curried lamb?"

"Sure."

She put Day to work chopping carrots, onions, and potatoes. She took the shank from the fridge and began assembling spices for the curry.

“Nutmeg,” Day said. “You can get stoned on nutmeg. John used to do it when there was no weed.” She talked about her father like an old pal. Her parents moved around a lot, and she hadn’t been in touch with them for a couple of years.

The doorbell chimed while Kelly was pouring olive oil. “Get that, will you?”

Day bounded down the hallway. She said something, but her voice was crushed by a sharp thud and heavy footsteps. Odette’s bodyguard barged into the kitchen. His pale blue eyes fixed on Kelly. “Where is she?”

Day squeezed past him. “This is Yount. Odette’s asshole bodyguard.”

Fear churned in Kelly’s stomach. “Odette? I dropped her off at the mall.”

Yount stepped backward, pushed open the door to the guest room, and peered inside. Then he headed for the stairs.

Kelly went after him. “I’m calling the cops.”

A smile twisted his mouth. “Go ahead.”

Her phone was in the kitchen and she didn’t want him roaming through the house without her. She turned to Day, who was watching from hallway. “Call the cops.”

She trailed Yount through the upstairs—bedroom, walk-in closet, bathroom, office. He checked under the bed and behind the shower curtain but otherwise touched nothing. “I told you, she’s not here. Get out of my house.”

“There was someone with her,” he said. “Who?”

“I don’t know.”

“He didn’t introduce himself?”

“I just wanted them gone. I don’t like drugs in my house. Day knows that.”

He snorted. "Day doesn't listen. You ought to know that." He thrust his face so close to hers that she saw individual hairs in one of his eyebrows. "You seem a little smarter, so I'm telling you. Don't let yourself be used."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Then you better figure it out." At the top of the stairs, Yount gestured for her to go down first. His chest nudged her forward, and a hard lump poked her shoulder. A gun inside his coat? He kept nudging. He wanted her to wonder if he was going to shove her down the stairs. And she did wonder, with every step.

Day opened the front door and stepped outside. "Satisfied, asshole?"

He paused long enough to glower and then strode across the lawn to a black Land Rover. Odette sat in the back, her head lowered.

Lightheaded, Kelly leaned against the wall. "Why did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Call him an asshole."

"Because that's what he is." Day frowned. "You're scared."

"Of course I'm scared. He forced his way into my house and threatened me. He claimed to be looking for Odette, but she was outside in his car."

"He was just fucking with us. He does that."

"Just be sure to tell the cops everything you know about him."

Day avoided meeting her eyes. "I didn't call."

"Why not?"

"Odette would be in worse trouble."

Instead of going back to the kitchen and the curried lamb, they wandered into the dark living room. It was early November and the evenings contracted suddenly into night. "He barged in here with a gun. I'm supposed to let that go?"

"I owe her," Day said. "She helped me when I was my most down."

Yount could park around the corner and sneak back through the trees behind the houses. He could be outside the window right now, watching them. Kelly drew the curtains and switched on a lamp. “Look, Odette’s welcome here, but not with Marcus. That includes while I’m out of town.”

Odette had been Day’s first friend in Boulder. Odette had taken her in and outfitted a darkroom for her in the basement. She still drove to the estate in the mountains to develop her prints. That perk might end now that she’d antagonized Yount.

“You never told me why you moved out,” Kelly said.

“Stuart.”

“He’s hardly ever there, you said.”

“Yeah, but his pit bulls are. Every time you scratch your ass, Yount reports back to Stuart. I mean, if you’re down with that, no problem.”

“Gotta be free,” Kelly said.

“Always.” A smile, arch and weary, flitted across Day’s face. “Hey, I have something for you.” She retrieved her backpack from the dining chair and handed Kelly a large envelope.

Inside were half a dozen eight-by-ten prints, multiple developments of two close-ups of Kelly’s face. She studied them, so caught up in Day’s experiments with contrast and nuance that she forgot she was looking at herself. It came as a shock when she remembered. The faces weren’t the familiar one in her bathroom mirror, the woman who dabbed her smudged mascara with a tissue and dreaded going to work. The photographs showed a woman with amazement shadowing her eyes, a woman caught in the world’s strangeness. Seeing them, Kelly understood why she couldn’t be the daughter her mother wanted, why moving far away from home had been her only hope. She understood who she was. And why

she was happy to keep buying Day's groceries and letting her stay in the house rent-free. "Damn, you're good."

Day grinned. "Yeah, I know."

"I'm leaving extra cash in the ceramic bowl in my office in case something comes up while I'm gone. Call me if you need to."

"Have fun in Chicago."

After the conference, Kelly planned to spend a few days wandering through the Art Institute and the Museum of Contemporary Art. She had to trust Day to keep her promise. Whatever drama was going on between Odette and her husband, Kelly didn't want to get caught in the middle. The bodyguard had shouldered his way into her house, armed. Maybe he was all bluff, or maybe he carried the gun because he would use it.

2

At the top of the stairs, Day stopped and listened to the voices. They boomed in the open space above the white geometric walls of the museum. The building's shape molded the sound. A blind person could hear it and know the height of the ceiling and the steepness of its vault. Another kind of sight. But Day was all eyes. Give her scaffolding and she could shoot the maze of gallery walls, the sophisticated rats nibbling snacks and sipping chardonnay. Not her kind of shot, though. She was more the up-close-and-personal, whites-of-their-eyes, breath-to-breath type, going for that flicker of an instant before the lens fogged.

She kept standing there, breathing funny. She couldn't be scared of those fools. Not her, the woman who'd flipped Baba and lived.

She'd felt sorry for one of his child whores and called the girl's parents. He chased her through the house with a blade until she locked herself in the bathroom. He slammed the door, yelling that he would cut her throat, bleed her in the tub and carve her like a chicken, wrap the chunks in newspaper and toss them in a dumpster behind the supermarket with the other rotten meat. She was too scared to feel herself, like her body had turned into air. Baba had a way with threats. He might have carried them out except for Shawn, his half brother. Shawn calmed him down and told Day to get the fuck out, warning her that if she

stuck her hook nose into their business again, he would personally waste her skinny ass and save Baba the trouble.

That was an occasion for terror. *This* was just a crowd of art snobs. No blades here. Just voices, diamond-sharp.

“Going to the party?”

Day whipped around, startled.

Stocky guy in jeans and a lumberjack shirt, not much taller than her. Dark hair streaked with gray. Life stamped in his face, deep impressions around his mouth and eyes. Irony in his smile but no trace of cruelty. He held out a gnarly hand.

“Leonard Proud.”

She reached out with caution. Not that he seemed like the type who gave women crushing handshakes, but he looked strong. “Day Randall.”

His hand closed over hers—no squeeze or shake, but firm—and then let go. “Kelly says nice things about you,” he said.

“You’re her friend?”

“More like colleague. I’m on the board of the museum.”

She reached for the scuffed Pentax hanging from her neck, the first and only camera she’d owned, her longtime crutch and trusty third eye.

He waved his arm. “No.”

“It’s, like, official. Photos for the newsletter.”

“Even worse.” But he squared his shoulders and turned his face to stone. Ready for his close-up.

“Dude. I’m not a firing squad.”

Leonard clamped his mouth to keep the laughter in. His cheeks puffed a little and his eyes crinkled in amusement. She saw the moment and took the shot. Snap, snap. What she did best. Kelly would never use the photo in the

newsletter—members of a board were supposed to look more dignified—but Day might add it to her portfolio if he agreed.

“Let me send you a print,” she said. “What’s your address?”

He gave her a business card, a plain one with a block font.

“You make Native American art? What kind?”

“Weaving and painting.”

“I’d like to see it.”

“There’s a couple of my pieces back there.” Leonard nodded toward the rear of the museum.

“Show me.”

“Some other time. I wanna get the meet-and-greet over with.”

Day followed him into a gallery of Inuit art. “Would you, like, do me a big favor? Point out the other board members so I’ll be sure and get shots of them. You and Joyce are the only ones I know.”

“How much is Joyce paying you?”

“She’s not.”

He snorted. “A new low, even for her.”

A glass case imprisoned several small totem animals carved from stone, including a curled-up seal so smooth and dark Day yearned to feel its coolness and weight in her hand. “It’s for Kelly. I mean, I’m not paying rent or anything, so I try to help.”

“You live with Kelly?”

“Yeah, for almost eight months. She’s in Chicago at a conference for curators, so I’m, like, helping her. It’s a surprise.”

Leonard raised his eyebrows. “You’re here without an invitation.”

“Do I need one?”

“Hell, no. You’re with me.”

Day followed him into the reception area, drafting in his wake like she sometimes drafted behind a semi in her Corolla to save fuel. She needed his forward energy to make her entry. She hated coming uninvited among these people wrapped in cashmere. Not hated—feared. *You have to tell yourself the truth because these people are going to lie.* Their smiles were rubbery, like masks.

Leonard veered toward the refreshments, tidbits of food on trays and glasses of wine lined up on the tablecloth beside them. Wine the color of pee after you drink way too much water. Day stopped. Too many people were crowded around the refreshments. She would catch Leonard after he got his food.

She felt something, turned, and caught Annie Laible staring from across the room. She smiled and waved and got a sour smile back. Annie had new and wilder hair, hennaed and spiked. Months ago, Day had asked permission to hang a few photographs for sale in her gallery—she needed money bad—and Annie had blown her off. Just a blunt “No” without saying why.

Joyce was talking with two men in their forties. Older than Day, but not by much. Day was thirty-eight, though she tried hard to forget it. The short guy was wasted, face bright pink, eyes shining and empty. The other was tall and gaunt. *His cheekbones drank the wind.* She remembered the line from a poem she read growing up. She forgot what poem. Anyway, it described this guy. He turned his head as if he felt her stare. Their eyes met. Locked. She recognized him. Not personally. More like she was an alien species who finds another of her kind among strangers.

She lifted her camera, zoomed in, and took his picture. Then zoomed out and got the whole group. They were probably important if Joyce was talking to them.

He walked over to her. “You’re Day Randall. I bought two of your prints.”

Day knew which ones. Soon after she came to Boulder, she submitted her portfolio for an exhibit at the museum. Joyce turned down the portfolio but said

she had a buyer for the prints at \$350 each. A fortune for Day. Of course, Joyce never gave up the buyer's name. She wouldn't want Day selling to him and cutting her out of a commission. Now here he was, this guy whose cheekbones drank the wind.

"What's your name?"

"My friends call me Gee."

She grinned. "Am I your friend?"

"I don't know. Are you?"

"I feel like we're the only ones from another planet."

Gee reached out and stroked her cheek. His fingertips set off a tingling that reached down to her core. "Let's play Find the Magic."

"What's that?"

"This exhibit is called Magic and Realism." He pointed to a painting. "What's magical?"

The painting showed a bird and a cat, the tension between prey and predator. The bird's beak was open in frozen song. The iridescent feathers, intense cobalt and silky green, burned into her mind. "It's like a window into someone's dream."

"We're doing analysis," Gee said. "Notice how the details aren't realistic. The color of the feathers, the way they glow. Not like any finch in the real world. And the proportions are skewed. The finch is ten times bigger than the cat. It fills the whole room."

"But it's afraid of the cat anyway."

"How do you know?"

"I just do."

"Maybe because the finch is hunched and the cat's kind of batting at it. Check out these claws. The tips are red."

"Yeah, like with blood."

“Exactly.”

Day shook her head. “I don’t have to take things apart. I see them whole.”

“There’s nothing whole. Everything is pieces.” Gee’s gaze played over her face and started her tingling just like his fingertips had. “The universe blew up a long time ago.”



Gee tied her up. Anyone else, she would have said no way. With him it was different. The coke launched her head into space, on a course to Planet Elsewhere. Transformed her body into a rush of energy. He bound her wrists together with a silk scarf and threaded a rope between them and then through a metal loop screwed into the wall above his bed. He tightened the rope until she couldn’t lie down without four pillows under her shoulders. The loop told on him. He made a habit of playing prisoner-in-the-dungeon with the women he brought home.

He yanked away one pillow and then another. Then another. Her body dangled. Almost at once her elbows and shoulders ached. Day begged him to untie her. Not that the pain mattered—she was too high to care—but she knew he wanted to hear those words. They were, after all, the same species, alien to this world.

His mouth moved over her body. He tongued her stomach, her belly button, her nipples. She waited for him to mention her non-breasts. Guys always said something, a stupid joke or fake reassurance. *I need a magnifying glass to find those. Hey, it don’t matter. You’re hot anyway, you’re scorching.* Not Gee. He treated them like ordinary breasts.

Soon she was screaming with pleasure.

When he was done, he untied her and said he needed to have her arms around him. She pressed her skin against his. Their sweat thrummed with the electricity between them. It made them one. Their body trembled with the pounding of their heart. He bent to her ear and whispered that she was the only living thing in a dead world and please, please bring him back to life. “You’re the magic,” he told her. “You’re the only magic.”



They fucked in his plush bed and her plain one. They went dancing. Day could have stayed with Gee forever, but on Sunday morning Odette called, sobbing. “Marcus is gone.”

No shit, home for Thanksgiving. Odette could be a drama queen. Day listened to her choke out a story about Marcus’s wanting her to leave Stuart. Insisting. “He knew I couldn’t. I told him—”

Marcus had been insisting for weeks. Nothing new there. “What makes you think—”

“I texted him. And called. And this morning Yount and his clones drove out into the pasture.”

“They patrol there.”

“Not that early. And Yount doesn’t go with them.”

“What is it you’re thinking?”

A long pause, filled with something Odette was afraid to put into words. “Just walk back there and look.”

“For what?”

“I don’t know. Tracks. Anything that—just look, okay? You know the patrol times. And if they catch you, say you’re taking pictures. Say I gave you permission.”

Day stood outside her bedroom door, naked except for her phone. She wanted to crawl back into bed with Gee, but Odette was her friend and she owed her so much. She went back into the room and kissed Gee, raking her fingers in his loose hair. “I gotta go to the darkroom. You know the film I shot at the exhibition? It’s, like, a gift for Kelly, for the newsletter she does.”

He gave her a sleepy smile. “Why now? She’s not coming back for a few days.”

“Yeah, but I can’t get in the darkroom unless Odette’s around and she called to say she’s around this morning. You can, like, hang out here and have coffee.”

“It’s all right, I have work to do anyway.” His hand caressed her thigh and slipped between her legs. “Call when you get home.”

On the way to Stuart’s, she fretted over the shadowy fear behind Odette’s words. A possibility occurred to her—a scary possibility that nudged her heart into high gear—and slowly an idea began to take shape.

She parked on an access road where the Jeep couldn’t be seen from the road. She hiked along the electric fence behind the property. She stayed under the trees and listened for the distant growl of an engine. Her boots crunched the pine needles. A bird’s cawing ripped the silence. But no engine. Pretty soon Yount’s goonies would begin their patrol around the fence. She had twenty minutes, maybe less, to reach the back of the fence and get out of sight.

Nothing so far. But supposing she found the tracks or whatever and took pictures, Odette would beg her to keep them secret. Even if they could set her free, Odette was so scared and used to being caged.

Stupid—trying to rescue someone who didn’t want to be rescued, as she knew only too well.

And yet.

She paused long enough to snap a picture of a tree. Nature wasn't her thing. Faces were. The tree's gnarly trunk had an ancient face.

She moved through the shadows while the meadow exploded with sunshine. The air had the brightness of fall in the mountains—everything clear, sharp, more real. Her camera never caught that light, only its hard shadows. It was wild light, beyond capture. Color film made no difference. Neither would the expensive DSLR camera Gee promised her. A camera and a laptop computer to manipulate the images.

Manipulate. The wrongness of the whole digital thing packed into a single word. You don't manipulate negatives, chemicals, and paper in a darkroom. You transform them. Chemistry becomes alchemy. Val's words.

The only kid at the commune, Day had followed Val around like a baby duck. Up and down between the garden rows, she breathed the warm smell of plants growing in the sun. Strawberries, zucchini. A damp-earth smell that lingered even in sleep. Once the gardening was done, Val shot photos with a 35 mm Pentax and developed them in a makeshift darkroom attached to the greenhouse. She taught Day photography. Then it happened, the inevitable shit. Sheila always screwed around, and John couldn't make her stop. They got thrown out of the commune. Day begged to stay without them. Val promised to take care of her, but the commune people said no way. They weren't giving Sheila an excuse to come back. Val gave Day the Pentax and some photography books. Day knew what a sacrifice it was. She tried to refuse. "I'm an old woman," Val said. "My spirit goes with you."

Day cupped the Pentax in her hands. She would keep taking photos with Val's camera—the photos that mattered—and use the digital camera for commercial work. Weddings and whatnot.

She reached the corner of the electric fence and turned. The creek bubbled up ahead. She checked her phone. The patrol would start any minute. Her boots scuffed through dead weeds and grass. She smelled water. She scanned the ground ahead, unsure what she expected to see until she spotted it—scraped mud where something was dragged out of the water and onto the bank. Something big. They must have rolled it into the creek and then pulled it under the fence and out of the water. They probably carried it from there. She couldn't find footprints in the rocky outcrops above the creek, but it was the only path. In the mountains, you stayed on the trails, especially when you carried something heavy. Somewhere farther up, they would pick a spot to leave the trail. Day felt confident of finding where. Seeing was her gift.

She squatted and aimed her camera up the creek and took a picture. Then she started up the trail.