

Amy Raye

It was snowing already, in early November, after days of hot, clear fall weather. The flakes landed on her tent like slow rain. She lay still, aware of every small, square inch around her, and in that stillness imagined changing her mind, sleeping almost warm for a few more hours, and after daybreak and coffee, packing up with the others and driving home.

Earlier that night, Kenny had asked her, “Do you still love him?” They’d been sitting by the fire. Aaron had already turned in.

She felt sorrow pass over her face when Kenny asked her this, and she knew Kenny had felt it, too, because he reached over to her chair, laid his hand on top of hers like something protective. He then moved his chair closer, lifted his arm, wrapped it around her shoulder, pulled her against him. It was an uncomfortable position, but she did not tell him that. He took his other arm, encircled her with it. He kissed the top of her head, pressed his face into her hair.

“You smell good,” he said.

“I smell like elk piss and smoke,” she said.

“No, I smell you.”

“What do I smell like?”

“Like something tangy and salty and sweet, like something I’ve never smelled before.”

And then her breathing and his became lost in the sound of the fire and the weight of moisture accumulating in the air. As brief as a moment, she felt a deep sense of the place, folding the days back to summer and wild rose columbine and life as pure as a mountain stream over a rocky bed.

“I’m going out in the morning,” Amy Raye said. “I wasn’t going to say anything. Yesterday I found a tree stand up on the mesa. It’s a good spot. There’s fresh sign.”

“Do you want me to go with you? I want to go with you.”

“No.”

“You shouldn’t go alone.”

“Kenny.” She said his name like she used to say that of her dog back home when Saddle was about to do something wrong. And then, “Don’t tell Aaron,” she said.

There were three of them—Kenny and Aaron and Amy Raye. Kenny and Aaron hunted with rifles. Aaron had filled his tag on the first day, taking down a four-point bull elk they’d come upon at a watering hole. Kenny had filled his tag for a cow elk the next, from a small herd grazing in a meadow, making a clean shot at about two hundred yards. They’d quartered the carcasses and hung the quarters from a two-by-four that they’d nailed between two trees alongside the camp. But Amy Raye didn’t hunt with a rifle. She hunted with a compound bow, which meant getting within twenty to thirty yards of an elk. Harvesting an elk with a bow during rifle season was legal but hardly heard of. Amy Raye knew if she was to have any chance, she’d have to head out by herself and find where the elk had scattered. Just the day before she’d broken off on her own, had hiked miles into the area, where she’d discovered excellent sign—elk urine, rubbings in the nearby trees, trails that crisscrossed, and fresh tracks. And in the grasses nearby she’d glassed smooth indentions of elk bedding. She’d come upon a tree stand tucked about fifteen feet high in a pinyon, with tree steps still in place. Hunters were supposed to remove their stands at the end of a season. The screw-in tree steps looked like they had been set for a while, a residue of dust and rain deposits coating the brown-tempered steel. Amy Raye had navigated a trail for herself away from the stand, and set several reflector tags on trees on her way out.

That evening before dinner, before she and Kenny had sat by the fire and Aaron had turned in, she’d walked through the woods to a shallow stream, barely three feet wide and six inches deep. She’d removed her clothes and squatted, her buttocks resting against her ankles, the water so cold it was

painful. She'd rushed through the ritual, running a nylon brush over her skin. But she hadn't washed her hair. And now, lying in her tent, she wished she had, hoping her scent wouldn't keep the elk away.

She turned on her flashlight and reached for her phone to check the time. Three thirty. There was a text from her husband. Hey, are you having a good night? I'm getting stuff done. It's good. Miss you like skin. She wrote back, I am blessed to have you, but I am seriously going to try harder.

Still bundled in her sleeping bag, she shed her long underwear, then crawled out of the bag and unzipped the opening flap of the tent, the air not more than twenty degrees, she was sure. Snow was now falling in sporadic flakes, melting almost as soon as it hit the ground. Next to her tent was a plastic container where she'd packed a set of clothes for each day, each item having been washed clean of grocery store detergents and perfumes and her own perspiration. Moving quietly so as not to wake Kenny or Aaron, she pulled on a fresh layer of thermals, wool socks, camouflage pants, a camouflage fleece jacket, her green hiking boots, and her brown fleece hat. She switched out her flashlight for her headlamp, which she secured over her hat. Carrying a roll of toilet paper, she walked toward the woods behind the tent.

Less than five feet from the back wall of the tent was a divot in the ground carved out by the fresh claw marks of a bear, a mother, most likely, digging for bugs for her young. Amy Raye calculated the distance again. Less than two of her own strides. Tired, cold, and fully aware of just how close the bear had been to her while she'd slept, something like *déjà vu* grazed her heart, as if she had already stood here a half-dozen times, and if she had, some other living being had stood here within breathing room of her a half-dozen times, too.

Aaron's tent was across from hers, about fifty feet. If she stood still, she could hear his snores muffled beneath the covers. Kenny's tent was farther away, south of the fire pit and cookstove.

She walked about thirty yards north of the camp to Aaron's truck, lowered the tailgate for a table, and made coffee, every move calculated so that she wouldn't wake the others, so that they wouldn't

insist on going with her. Aaron, whose breath smelled of cigarette smoke, and whose body labored when he walked, especially when climbing uphill. Or Kenny, sweet Kenny, who reminded her of a quarter horse stallion in the middle of summer, of Tennessee and hollers and hay trucks and alfalfa, and all those places she missed too often but knew she would never go back to.

The snow had stopped falling, but its moisture still coated the air. She drank a large cup of coffee, then poured another, more for the warmth than the caffeine. Silence hovered over her like a tarpaulin. The wilderness wasn't asleep. She knew it had awoken with her first stirring, was waiting for her next move, watching her. Its stillness was a sure sign. Sitting on the tailgate, her legs folded underneath her, she eased herself into the silence, becoming the same wilderness. The caffeine began to take effect and burned in her stomach with the anticipation she thrived from.

Amy Raye had hunted since she was a girl, going out with her grandfather. She didn't hunt elk then, nor did she hunt with a bow. Bow hunting came later. She hunted whitetail deer with a .243 Winchester rifle, and later a .280 Remington. While other girls turned sweet sixteen, she learned how to field-dress a deer.

Amy Raye's husband, Farrell, didn't hunt. He'd never even held a gun. It was after he and Amy Raye had met that she'd switched to bow hunting. Farrell didn't want guns in the house, especially with his daughter, Julia, who was four years old at the time and living with him. He was a man who hated violence of any kind, including harming the dreams of another. And it was that very nature of him that would have never let him stand in the way of his wife having the opportunity to make a trip like this. He would tell her that he loved the immensity of her and that this was part of that immensity.

Amy Raye finished her coffee and packed water bottles and food, enough for a full day. She sprayed herself with elk estrus as if it were perfume—her neck, under her arms, the soles of her boots. The warning signs on the bottle said not to spray the estrus on one's body or clothing. It was to be sprayed on the ground for the purpose of luring elk to a certain area, while the hunter hid away from the spot. Most hunters didn't adhere to those warning signs. The serious hunters didn't care if they smelled

of elk urine; they became the female elk, mastered her call, a high-pitched mewling, much like the cry of a young cat. It wasn't just a bull elk that might mistake the hunter for a female. It was the mountain lion, as well.

Amy Raye stepped into the tree stand harness she'd stowed in her pack, pulled the harness straps over her shoulders, and tightened the leg and waist buckles. She set her bow, quiver, and packing frame in the extra cab of the truck, and then climbed into the driver's side. Aaron had left the keys on the floorboard, Amy Raye knew. She picked up the keys and closed the door, shifted the truck into neutral, and let it roll down the slow decline toward the road, her foot pressing intermittently on the brake, the wet earth and rock turning beneath her.

Pru

The morning Colm stopped by was no different from most others. I was sitting on the porch having my coffee, a quilt pulled snug around my shoulders. Kona lay curled in a tight circle at my feet, and just beyond was the river. I could hear it twisting over a bed of rocks, tiny caps crashing forward, a sign that a storm had settled in the mountains. The third rifle season for deer and elk had closed the day before. Hunters would be packing up camp and heading home; the grocery store aisles would be rid of orange vests and carts stocked with coffee, beer, cold cuts, and toilet paper; the hotels would empty out. Ever since the beginning of archery season in September, I'd been driving up and down four-wheel roads in my government Tahoe, checking hunters' licenses and scouting camps for illegal kill. Two weeks ago I'd been called to a scene where a man from Texas had nearly lost his left foot in an all-terrain accident, his Sorel boot only shreds.

I work for the Bureau of Land Management as an archaeological law enforcement ranger, with the only certified search-and-rescue dog in the county. Because I'm a ranger, I do a little bit of everything, especially during hunting season. My job falls under the Archaeological Resources Protection Act. I enforce the laws against archaeological looting. I survey for disturbance, walk sacred ground. I'm a guardian of sorts, a police for the past.

I've been a morning person for as long as I can remember, craving the solitude when I awake as much as a strong cup of coffee. Most mornings I will read. On days when I know I'll be in the office and not in the field, I'll take Kona on a run with me. That morning I watched the sky, listened to the river, thought about starting a load of laundry. I still had another hour or so before Joseph would be getting up for school. Joseph is a beautiful blue-eyed boy with hair the color of sun-bleached hay. "Pet me," he used to say, when he was competing for attention with the border collie we used to have. And so I would stroke

his hair and kiss his cheeks, salty from play and the outdoors. “How much does Mama love you?” I’d say. “Big much,” he’d say, holding his arms out wide. Then I would take him to me like a mother bear with her cub.

But these days Joseph is taller than I. He’s been driving for over a month now. I try to tell myself his getting his license is a good thing, that he is growing up. But still there’s something else. Something I can’t put a name on. Something that happened so fast, I never saw it coming.

An icy breeze ribboned through the air. I slid my bare toes underneath Kona’s belly and drank the rest of the coffee, the liquid having turned lukewarm. A dog barked in the distance. Kona raised his head, his ears alert. Then the crunching of large tires against loose stone. The truck’s beams soon rounded the house and lit up a pathway across the tall grass toward the riverbank.

I knew it was Colm. Knew the sound of his vehicle and the way he slammed his door.

“Morning,” I yelled through the screen.

Colm climbed the porch steps and lifted the screen door slightly to open it. The door needed new hinges, another item on my to-do list that I kept promising myself I’d get to.

Kona settled back down when he saw it was the sheriff.

“You’re up awfully early,” I said.

“No different than you.”

“Want some coffee?” I started to get up.

“Stay put. I know my way to the kitchen.”

I’ve known Colm since before my son was born. Colm would read the gas meter each month at a small rental house where I used to live. Like me, Colm isn’t from Rio Mesa. He moved here as a young man, somewhere in his early twenties, taking on a job with White River Natural Gas. Then when the only television tower was shut off, when residents in the county who wished to watch TV were forced to buy into satellite, Colm began installing dishes and network boxes. His work brought him into people’s homes, where he was offered coffee and beer and neighborly conversation, the kind of conversation that led to ideas. Colm became someone people got to know and liked. He listened and had a way of letting

people know he'd heard what they'd said, heard it and thought about it and thought about it some more. Maybe it was the way his green eyes would fasten intently on the eyes of another, or the way he'd nod contemplatively, or the way he'd wait calmly, his whole body still, for a person to finish speaking before he'd respond. I'm not sure who first introduced the notion that Colm should run for sheriff. But once the idea got around, it spread like a rumor in a small town, the kind of rumor people get accustomed to real quickly until it is simply the way things are, or in Colm's case, the way things would be.

Colm appeared with a mug in his hand. "How was your weekend?" he asked.

"Not bad. Yours?"

"Can't complain." Colm sat in the cedar-backed chair beside me, his big knees squared out in front of him. "I saw Joseph the other day. Over by the school. He seems to be getting along all right."

"Sometimes I worry about him," I said.

Colm blew on the coffee before he took a loud swallow. "Course you do. You're his mother."

I smiled a little. And then that part of me that had curled itself deep down in my chest started to stir. That part of me that wanted to say, *He's all I have*, but instead I said, "It's five o'clock in the morning. My coffee isn't that good to bring you out here."

Colm took another swallow, pulled back his lips, and exhaled slowly. "A call came in last night. Missing hunter."

"Where?"

"East Douglas. She came out here with a couple of guys from Evergreen. Took the truck out by herself sometime yesterday morning. The guys she'd traveled with called a little while ago. She still hasn't shown."

"Did she have her cell with her?"

"If she did, she's not answering. Or can't get a signal."

"Where's the camp?" I asked.

"A pull-off in Pintada Draw. One of her friends thought she might have headed east toward Big Ridge. Said he thought he heard a gun go off later that morning, but he wasn't sure. Except she was

hunting with a bow,” Colm said. “Her friends filled their tags with rifles a couple of days ago.”

“Anyone out there yet?” I asked.

“Deputy in Rangely is on his way now. See if he spots the vehicle, a black Ford 350. I’m going to try to get a helicopter out there this afternoon.”

Colm ran his fingers through his straight black hair flecked with gray. He paused just a second over the nape of his neck. “She probably huddled up somewhere for the night. Once it starts getting light she’ll find her way back.”

“Did she have any food or water with her?”

“Her friends thought so, but they weren’t sure.”

Colm was now looking at me dead on. I knew he was concerned. He wouldn’t have shown up at my house at five in the morning if he hadn’t been. He was following protocol. Wait till first light. Sheriffs mounted anywhere from fifty-five to a hundred full-fledged searches in Colorado each year, and most of them were successful and short-lived. Only a handful of times would the search turn into the kind of harrowing saga every sheriff feared. Yet with each missing person, the potential presented itself.

“We’re going to have to get a ground team on location,” Colm said. “If Dean finds the vehicle and no hunter, be a good idea for you and Kona to team up with him before the place starts getting mixed up with too much scent.”

“What’s her name?” I asked.

“Amy Raye Latour. Thirty-two. Husband and two kids back home.”

It had been cold during the night. So cold that I’d gotten up a little after two to add more logs to the stove. “East Douglas is a big area. May take Dean hours before he finds the vehicle.”

“Where you planning to be today?”

“Piceance Creek. Wanted to check out a few camps that are clearing out.”

Colm’s head lulled into an easy nod. His eyes stared off through the porch screen. He had a big heart. He would worry about this woman until he found her, and yet it wasn’t just the weight of the missing hunter that was pulling him down. Colm’s divorce had been final for six months. I knew he still didn’t

sleep much. I could hear it in that deep throaty voice of his, see it in the folds over his eyes and the way his broad shoulders hung forward.

“You holding up okay?” I asked.

He shot me a quick glance. “Yeah.” Then his gaze roamed off again. “I know I look like shit, but it’s actually better having her gone. I just have to get used to it all.”

I waited for him to say something else. When he didn’t, I reached for his mug. “Want a warm-up?”

“No, I should get going.”

I started to stand. Colm was still sitting in the chair.

“She never loved me. It’s hard to admit, but it’s true. Figure that. Fourteen years and she never loved me.”

Though we’d talked about some of the details of his divorce, his emotions weren’t something we’d touched upon. Still, his vulnerability didn’t surprise me. It’s one of those things a woman picks up on.

“Colm, you don’t really believe that.”

“Sure.”

“Why’d she marry you then?”

“She liked my dog.” Colm laughed and shook his head. “Goddamn woman marries me for my dog.”

Colm wasn’t trying to be funny. He’d had a Labrador named Ruger, black and overweight with a sloppy mouth.

“That’s not why she married you,” I said. “People change.”

“Maybe.” Colm was now leaning forward with his arms on his knees. His jacket, a dark brown leather, was stretched snug across his shoulders.

Colm had lost his dog a year back to cancer, and now he’d lost his wife. He didn’t have any kids. Maggie had never wanted any. Perhaps she knew all along she would leave, even if she’d waited fourteen years to do it.

I dug my toes deeper beneath Kona’s fur. “Ever thought about getting another dog?” I said.

“Thought about it.”

“Maybe that wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

Colm reached over and gave Kona a pat. “You’re a good boy. You keep Pru company, you hear?”

Then Colm stood to take his mug to the kitchen.

“Leave it.” I climbed out of the lounge.

It was somewhere in the twenties, and with the wind-chill factor, more like the teens, especially in the mountains.

“It’s cold out there,” I said.

Colm knew what I was saying. “I’ll call you.”

He lifted the screen door about a half inch off the planked flooring, pulled it toward him, stepped down, and shut the door behind him.

I carried the two empty coffee cups into the kitchen and set them in the sink. I would take a shower, eat a quick breakfast, get Joseph up for school. Colm might be calling soon. If Amy Raye Latour was still missing, I’d want to start searching while the hunter’s tracks were fresh.

I walked down the short hallway to the bathroom, turned on the water, and held my fingers underneath the tap while I waited for the water to become warm. Kona lay on the floor beside the tub. Together we had established a routine that I’d come to depend on. I knew Colm would have to do the same, create new patterns of behavior to close the god-awful spaces of loneliness from losing someone he’d loved.