

See What Develops

Holly sat with her elbows on her knees, bouncing her leg and making her whole body shake. Her gaze was focused on the spiral of the braided rug, tracing it with her eyes. It would normally calm her nerves and she could lose herself in the tight coils. Tonight, she didn't feel like anything would settle her mind.

The knock at the door almost made Holly scream aloud, but she quickly shook off the shock and walked over to the door. Peeking through the little peep hole, she saw the rows of braids on the top of Maxine's head.

"You're late," Holly said, opening the door. "You said fifteen minutes."

"You know how downtown traffic is," Maxine said, taking off her coat. "Besides, this was kinda last minute. Is everything OK?"

"Yes...no? I don't know—"

"Hey, Holly...you're shaking."

"Just...come with me," Holly said. Holly led the way into her improvised darkroom. Boxing away her makeup and shampoos, Holly attached a red light to her shower curtain rod and had the bottles of developing chemicals in the tub with her film development canister. One of her photography friends had referred to it as a 'Breaking Bad Photo Studio' but it was as much as Holly could afford in her studio apartment. A strip of brown film hung over the bathtub, drying from Holly's development stage. Holly folded her arms and took a shaky breath as Maxine looked at her work. Maxine stepped close and looked at one of the negative frames, holding it up Holly's small flashlight as an improvised projector against the smooth bathtub wall.

"You were photographing crime scenes again?"

"I know you said not to, but I happened to be walking by a couple nights ago and—"

"Holly, this has to be illegal!"

"I mean, it's a questionable legal grey area..." Holly stammered. "That's not the point! And besides, the murder had happened outside and—"

"A murder scene?" Maxine snapped. "Holly, please tell me you weren't photographing dead bodies? That's so disrespectful!"

"I—they were covered for most of it..."

"Holly..."

"But then I got back and I was developing the film and...look."

Holly lifted the film up and shined the light through one in particular. Maxine sighed and turned back to the slightly blurry image on the wall. Examining the still, Maxine could see the black and white shapes of police officers, flares of flashing lights and the formless masses of bodies under light blue, medical tarps. There were a few out of focus men who looked out of place, walking around in street clothes, but Maxine assumed they were witnesses waiting to talk to police.

“OK, I know why these creep me out, but why are you so scared?”

“So, these guys...you can see them, right?”

“Yeah, the witnesses?”

“They weren’t standing there when I took the pictures.”

“What?”

“Remember this?” Holly picked up the camera that was sitting on her sink. It was a vintage piece that was silver and black with a textured grip. Holly had posted about getting it on social media when she got it, thrilled at her find. “I was trying out that new camera I got at the flea market. I didn’t think anything of it at first, but it was like...twelve bucks for a functional camera. And I’ve wanted a film camera for a while. I took it out two days ago to learn about developing film and those came out great.”

“So, you’re...scared that your photos are too good?”

“No, these people? They were *not* standing there when I took the pictures. And they... they were under the sheets.”

Maxine looked at the film hanging on the line again and frowned. Lifting it up so she could see the negative through the red lamp, Maxine focused specifically on one of the men who appeared to be both standing and laying on the ground. The vacant eyes stared up at the sky, but the faces were similar enough to the standing witnesses.

“They could be brothers?”

“I’m telling you, they were not standing there!”

“Holly,” Maxine set her hands on Holly’s shoulders. “I know you haven’t been selling your stuff as much as you’d like. Maybe this is stress?”

“I’m not going crazy, Maxine!”

“Then it’s a shitty camera! You got it for twelve bucks. Maybe it’s some kind of weird double exposure? These vintage pieces of garbage were used to fake ghost pictures all the—“

“Not in different positions!” Holly said. “Different facial expressions, different posture... Max, this is really freaking me out!”

“So, you have a camera that takes pictures of ghosts, now?”

“It’s the only thing I can think of!” Holly caught her volume and wrapped her arms around herself. “What do I do?”

“Holly, you need to relax,” Maxine took the camera and raised it up to her eye level. She pushed the button. Holly recoiled slightly at the camera, but exhaled with relief when nothing happened.

“See?” Maxine said, waving the camera around. “It’s just a piece of junk. Get rid of it if you want, but don’t run yourself ragged thinking that you have a haunted camera. Even if it did take pictures of ghosts, it’s not like they hurt you through the film. It’s just a camera.”

Holly nodded and swallowed hard. She reached out to take the camera, but Maxine pulled it out of her reach and gave her a stern look.

“Say it...” Maxine ordered.

“It’s just a camera,” Holly sighed, nodding. “Maybe...there’s a mechanism that gets jammed when it’s supposed to be turning the film or something. I mean, I did get it cheap...”

“See?” Maxine handed the camera over to Holly. “Look, I know you’re having a tough time making ends meet doing the freelance, artsy stuff, so what if I told my boss I knew a new photographer who would be willing to do a few wedding events? I’m not promising rent, but it’d be enough to get you groceries and keep you from turning into a starving artist.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Holly nodded, turning the camera around in her hands. “I guess having a gig would help with my stress.”

“If it’s all the same? Bring your digital camera, yeah? This dinky toy might be good for artistic shots, but our clients prefer not to have clear pictures...in color.”

“Fine,” Holly smiled and shook her head. “Boring, run-of-the-mill wedding shoot it is.”

Maxine promised to come over again tomorrow after she’d spoken with her boss to see about getting Holly some work. Holly took a deep breath, traced the pattern on her braided rug briefly with her eyes and went back to the bathroom when her breathing settled. She tore down the offending strip of film and threw it in the garbage. She took the other roll of film out of her camera, almost threw it out as well, but decided to see what developed first.

Most of the other pictures on this roll were fine. Looking through them into the red light overhead, Holly actually liked a fair number of them. She’d have to go down to the print shop and get some of them printed out. The camera may have only worked about seventy percent of the times she’d used it so far, but Holly decided she was still a good photographer.

When she made it to the end of the roll, Holly had nearly forgotten the last photo that Maxine had taken. Holly lifted it to the light and dropped the roll of film. Grabbing her light, she shined the beam against the negative against her bathroom wall. Maxine had managed to capture Holly, standing in front of her shower. She had also captured an image of a man Holly didn’t recognize.