



MEG

GARDINER

CLASS REUNIONS CAN BE A KILLER

CROSSCUT

Excerpt: *Crosscut*

1

The breeze gusted through the wind chimes. They sang a jarring melody. Overhead a pair of fighter jets howled past, ripping silver across the sky above China Lake.

Kelly Colfax lugged a grocery bag from the trunk of her car. She had twelve things to do in the next two hours and she should have written them down. The desert heat was bad for her memory. Did Scotty say he was coming home early? She unstuck her skirt from the back of her thighs. She had to change and get to the nightclub in time to set up. Tonight she meant to put things right.

She had forgotten her haircut, but that didn't matter. Gaining twenty pounds in fifteen years mattered, but tonight she could smile and say *See?* She had a good reason. It wasn't the pressure. She wasn't a screw up. People couldn't blame her for all the things that had been going wrong. Couldn't call her the B-Team anymore, or Slacker or Space Cadet. Tonight they would apologize. They would congratulate and envy her. With a little smile forming on her lips, she opened the door and walked into the kitchen.

A stranger was standing by the sink.

She saw short hair, olive skin and eyes that seemed all pupil, deep and black. Dressed in utilities – working blues, like enlisted personnel wore. What was someone from the base doing in her kitchen? The stranger flexed both hands. Kelly saw them peripherally but couldn't break from that black gaze. A gold aura flared at the corner of her vision.

'So.' The stranger's voice was sharp and high pitched. 'First question. Am I here?'

Kelly stared. On the counter were scissors and a funnel and a roll of electrical tape. And her high school yearbook.

'You think you're dreaming a sailor girl in your kitchen. You think I'm a nightmare.'

Kelly opened her mouth but couldn't form words. A girl? This freaky being flexing those weird fingers? Something wrong with them, like doll's fingers. And her face was expressionless.

'Question two,' she said. 'Can you run?'

Kelly looked at her feet. Fear curled around her chest like a thorny vine. She couldn't lift them. How could the stranger know that? *Was* this a nightmare?

'Also a no.' The stranger's lips drew back over her teeth. 'No flight. No fight.'

The fear pricked sharper. Kelly looked toward the front door. 'Scotty...'

The stranger reached for the answering machine on the kitchen counter and pressed Play. Kelly heard her husband's voice.

'Kell, I'm not going to make the party. I have to pull a double shift. Don't hate me.'

She dropped the groceries. A bottle broke and milk gushed across the linoleum. Scotty kept talking and Kelly's legs remained frozen. The stranger's freaky hands opened high school yearbook and flipped through it.

'West. Skinner. Delaney. Colfax. Chang...' She stopped. 'Tell me about your classmates. How much do you know?'

Kelly felt saliva pooling in the back of her throat.

'Well?'

The stranger kept flipping through the yearbook and Kelly felt tears forming. She knew why those hands were freaky. The stranger was wearing latex gloves.

She looked at Kelly. A new voice roared from her throat, deep and booming. *Tell me.*

That voice unglued Kelly's foot. She moved it backward. Now the other. A sound was sliding from her mouth, a moan. This wasn't a waking nightmare. She had to run. She slid her foot another inch, turned and flung herself toward the door.

The darts from the Taser caught her between the shoulder blades. The electric shock made her drop instantly. Her face smacked the floor. She lay splayed, her arms and legs shivering like jelly. Saliva ran out of her mouth onto the cool tile beneath her cheek.

She saw the stranger walk to the knife rack. The sound of metal rang in the kitchen. The stranger pulled out the carving knife. Kelly felt her skirt turning wet and warm as she peed herself.

The stranger's boots appeared. She flipped Kelly onto her back as though she were a hunk of meat. The knife shone under the kitchen lights. Outside, the wind chimes rang.

The stranger leaned over and dogtags swung out from beneath her utility shirt. On the chain with the tags was a gnarled piece of metal. That wasn't

Navy. Kelly saw a scar near her collarbone. Tracks, like an animal had mauled her.

‘If you can’t talk about it, we’ll have to take a different tack. Let’s see if you can feel it.’

She put down the knife, grabbed Kelly’s wrist and pulled her toward the refrigerator. Her grip was like a wrench. She took the roll of electrical tape, whipped it around Kelly’s wrists, and wound it around the handle for the refrigerator door, binding her there.

Kelly’s juddering subsided into pins and needles. She could feel her muscles coming back under control, but when she moved her leg, it flailed like a frog jabbed with an electrode in biology lab. She heard the stranger, opening cabinets and pulling things out. She turned her head.

The stranger now held a bottle of Drano crystals. She walked to the spot where Kelly had fallen and poured the drain cleaner on the wet splotch of urine. It hissed and bubbled and filled the air with the caustic stink of lye and ammonia.

Reaching for the carving knife, she knelt and hitched Kelly’s skirt up to her panties, revealing chunky thighs. She held the Drano above Kelly’s leg and pressed the serrated edge of the knife to the inside of her thigh.

‘Let’s start over. Tell me when it hurts.’

2

The wind skipped over me. I stood in the parking lot, shielding my eyes from the setting sun. The heat was a wall against my face.

‘This was a bad idea. Let’s get out of here,’ I said.

Out on the highway an eighteen-wheeler rumbled past. Dust spun into the air behind it, blowing across the razor wire that marked the edge of the naval base.

Jesse looked at me as if I’d blown a cylinder. ‘Are you nuts? You can’t back out now.’

I peered over the roof of the Mustang at the strip mall. ‘Nuts isn’t backing out. Nuts is going in there.’

He pulled off his sunglasses. ‘Let me get this straight. Evan Delaney is chickening out of her high school reunion?’

The invitation read *China Lake's brightest nightspot hosts our festive gathering*. The nightclub sat between the adult bookstore and the auto wrecking yard. Beyond them stretched a million acres of absence: The Naval Air Warfare Center, where mirages hovered over the desert floor and the horizon flung itself up into mountains, purple and red against a huge sky.

Above the door of the club a banner batted in the wind. BASSETT HIGH 15TH – WELCOME BACK HOUNDS! Music banged through the windows. I could see the crowd packed inside.

‘It’s a set up,’ I said.

I handed Jesse the invitation, which specified *Dress: party casual*. In the high Mojave that means shoes optional, but the reunion committee had lied.

‘They’re dressed to the nines. I see sequins.’

‘Damn, I should have gone with the ballgown and stilettos.’

I made a face at him. He looked perfectly presentable in jeans and a white button-down shirt. For that matter, I looked perfectly presentable in jeans and a white button-down shirt. How had I let that happen? God, we’d be voted cutest couple. They’d stick little cardboard crowns on our heads and ask whether we were engaged and why Jesse looked like he’d been smashed over a cliff. I’d say on and off, and because he had been. Then I’d stupidly mention that we were both lawyers, and spend the evening explaining that no, I didn’t practice anymore and yes, their ex really could sue them for pouring sugar in the gas tank of the car. Why the hell had I come?

I pointed at the window. ‘That’s Ceci Lezak handing out nametags. She ran Student Council like it was the Reichstag.’

He looked. ‘Explaining that funny little mustache. Come on, I want to meet her. Plus that guy who set his hair on fire at the talent show, and the girl who turned those four chickens loose, with numbers painted on their backs.’

‘One, two, three and five. That was me.’

‘And your mortal enemy could turn up.’

I groaned. ‘Seeing Valerie is the last thing I need.’

I glanced north at mountains arrayed like saw blades. The Sierras and Panamints, and the Cosos, where Renegade Canyon cut deep through the rocks. One afternoon there, one debacle, had led to four years of rancor.

‘We’ll set up a steel cage and you can settle old scores,’ he said. ‘Grease up with Swedish meatball gravy and go at it.’

I stepped back. 'You need to cut down on the painkillers. And the satellite TV.'

He drummed his fingers on the trunk of the car. 'Last winter you fired a clip of ammunition at a homicidal maniac in your own house. You can't let a few snobs in shiny dresses send you packing.'

I sighed. He took my hand.

'Besides, don't you want to see your old boyfriend? What's his name, Tommy Chong?'

'Chang.'

He grinned. 'Thought so.'

He headed up the curb cut and toward the door of the club, nodding at the auto wrecking yard. 'Stay here and admire that giant heap of old tires. I'm going in.'

I put a hand on my hip. 'It isn't your reunion.'

His smile was wicked. 'Wanna bet?'

He pushed through the door.

Nobody was faster on his feet than Jesse, metaphorically speaking. Anything he thought up, he could undoubtedly pull off, despite being five years younger than everyone else here, and having grown up in Santa Barbara, and the fact that nobody in my graduating class had been anywhere as gifted and good looking, or paraplegic.

'Dammit.' I chased after him.