



Revenge So Sweet

by N. J. Lindquist

Beth Dalton slipped her gloved right hand under the seat of the old black Ford sedan and pulled out a Colt .38. Squaring her shoulders, she opened the car door.

At 4:00 A.M., the street was deserted. Not that anyone would have recognized her. Her wavy blond mid-length hair was covered by a black wig done in a page-boy reminiscent of oriental women in 1940's movies. A black jacket and baggy long black skirt hid her attractive figure.

The .38 was hidden in the folds of her skirt as she went through the door of the large condominium. She rang three apartment numbers at random before getting a response. A woman's voice answered sleepily.

"Telegram delivery," Beth said in a husky voice.

"This time of night?" the woman asked. But she buzzed the door.

Beth walked to the elevators and pressed the "up" button. Within seconds, a door opened. Beth hit floor 22. The only sound other than the soft purr of the elevator was the wild thumping of her heart. But when the elevator stopped, she walked out and turned left. She passed several doors until she came to 224. Taking a deep breath, she pressed the buzzer.

After a brief wait, she heard movement. Then the sound of the bolt's being released. The door opened a foot. A man in his early forties stood there. Short brown hair went in every direction. Face puffy. Eyes barely open. Bare torso, with blue-striped pajama bottoms. Nothing to hide the growing paunch of the middle-aged business man.

"You know what time it is?" he asked gruffly.

"I know," Beth said softly.

The door opened wider. The man squinted at her, puzzled. "What—?"

A loud blast shook the air. The man staggered backward, hands clutching his chest, astonishment etched on his face.

Beth didn't wait for him to fall. She raced through the hallway, pressed the "down" button, and threw herself in as the door opened. Her mind surged with fear as she descended, but when she entered the lobby, she was still alone.

On the 22nd floor, a woman screamed and a crowd began to gather.

Beth drove around the building until she came to the chosen spot. She carefully threw the revolver behind the bushes. That finished, she drove home, only stopping briefly to get rid of her disguise.

According to the analysis Beth had paid for years before, she was a spring. She never wore black. Made her look pale and washed out. She stopped at an outside Salvation Army clothing bin to remove the black clothing and donate them. Underneath she wore a turquoise jogging outfit.

The wig and shoes went into a dumpster used by a group of townhouses.

The latex gloves she'd worn under the black ones went into a second dumpster.

As arranged, she left the car on a side-street and walked the short distance to her well-tended, two-story home. No one saw her. In her suburban neighborhood, no one got up before six.

Inside the house, she checked on the kids. They were still asleep. No one would ever know about the crushed sleeping pills in their hot chocolate—just enough to make sure they slept soundly. The doctor had given her a prescription for the pills—Dilantin—when she first told him about the divorce and how she was having trouble sleeping.

She went into the kitchen to make sure the kids' lunches were ready for the morning. That done, she grabbed a Tylenol, took a few gulps from the bottle of gin she kept in her flour bin, and fell into bed.

The next morning, she was asking Robbie what kind of jam he wanted when the door bell rang.

"I'll get it!" Tim yelled.

Beth continued to spread strawberry jam on Robbie's toast.

"Mom, it's some cops!" Tim came rushing into the kitchen, his eyes gleaming with excitement and, yes, just a hint of fear. At thirteen, Tim knew the police didn't appear for no reason.

"Cops!" Robbie, six, was thrilled. Beth grabbed his shirt to keep him from rushing into the hallway.

"Mom," eleven-year-old Sandra complained as she came into the kitchen. "Why are there two policemen in the front hall?"

"I'm just going to ask them," Beth said gently. "You kids finish your breakfast or you'll be late for school." She walked to the front hall and, eyebrows raised, glanced inquiringly from the tall young man to the shorter, older one.

"Sorry to bother you so early, ma'am," the younger one said.

"That's all right," Beth replied. "How can I help you?"

“Maybe we should go in and sit down.” The older man motioned toward the living room.

Beth led the way.

Robbie appeared in the doorway, his eyes bulging with anticipation.

“Robbie, go and get ready for school,” Beth said. She looked at one of the officers. “Will this take long?”

The two men glanced at each other. “I’m afraid so,” the older one said.

“If I could get the kids to school...?”

The men looked at each other again. “Might not be a bad idea.”

“Go ahead, ma’am,” the young one agreed. “We can wait a few minutes.”

Beth went to the kitchen. In whispers, she told the kids she didn’t know what the men wanted, but was sure it was no big deal, and she’d tell them all about it when they got home from school.

When they were gone, she smoothed her hair before composing herself with a quick mouthful from her bottle.

The two men were sitting where she had left them.

She sat across from them. “Now, if you could just tell me how I can help you? I have an aerobics class in half an hour.”

The older man did the talking. “Ma’am, you have a husband named Frank Dalton?”

“Technically,” Beth replied calmly.

“What do you mean?”

“We’re getting a divorce. We separated two months ago.”

“I see. Well, we’ve got a man who was shot and killed last night. He’s been identified as a Frank Dalton. We need you to take a look at him.”

“Shot? Frank?” Beth clenched her fists. “No!” She put her hands over her mouth. “How?”

“We aren’t sure yet, ma’am. He was apparently shot when he opened the door of the apartment.”

“At Marie’s?”

The officer consulted his notebook. “The apartment belonged to a Miss Marie Friesen.”

“Yes, that’s the girl he’s going to marry,” Beth said. “She must be terribly upset. I need to go to her.”

The men looked at each other.

“What is it?” Beth asked.

“Well, it seems a bit odd that you would be concerned about the woman your husband seems to have left you for.”

Her voice retained its calmness. “Frank and I are going through a friendly divorce, officer. I like Marie. I don’t blame Frank for wanting to marry her.”

“If you say so, ma’am.”

Beth drove behind the police car to the morgue. An officer on either side, she waited as a sheet was pulled down. The first thing she noticed was that the expression of shock Frank had registered upon the bullet’s impact was now gone. His face was impassive and—she touched his cheek gently—cold. He felt very cold. Of course, they’d keep this room cool.

“Do you know him, ma’am?” the younger of the two officers asked. His voice was polite, as if he didn’t want to intrude on her thoughts.

“Oh, yes,” she said. “It’s Frank all right.” She started walking toward the door, but she was suddenly overcome. Tears streamed down her cheeks. The older policeman put an arm around her back and half pushed, half-carried her from the room. He set her on a bench in the hallway and waited, ill-at-ease, until she was able to look up at him and smile. “You must think I’m crazy,” she said, “to fall apart like this over a man I’m divorcing.”

“No, ma’am. Death can be pretty shocking, no matter whose it is.”

She wiped her eyes with a Kleenex. “We had a lot of good years, you know. Nearly fifteen. And three terrific kids. It’s only this past year that—well, that things didn’t go so well.”

“That’s a good way to look at it,” he encouraged. “See the big picture.”

“Speaking of seeing the big picture—” Her voice rose with anger. “Who did this?”

“We don’t know, ma’am. Not yet.”

“But you will find out? This person will be punished?” She began to cry again. “What am I going to tell my kids? Their daddy—!”

Fifteen minutes later, Beth was seated in a small cluttered office. Across from her was an investigator from homicide, a deep-voiced woman about fifty years old with short, dark hair sprinkled with gray and a chunky, hard body in a cheap pantsuit.

“Sorry to have to ask you this, Mrs. Dalton, but where were you last night?”

“Where was I? Oh, you mean when Frank was shot.”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t do it, you know. Why would I? Frank was a reasonably good husband and a very good father. We didn’t hate each other the way some do.”

“Even so, we need to know where you were last night.” The lady investigator sounded bored. Likely this was routine for her.

Beth half-wished she could tell the truth, just to see if the woman would react. “Well, I took Robbie to his soccer game from 6:30 to 7:30, and then I picked up Tim and two of his friends from hockey at 8:00. I took the kids home and got Robbie ready for bed. Sandra came in from her friend’s at 9:00, and she went to bed. Tim was up until about 10:00, and then I watched the news and had a cup of coffee and went to bed about, oh, 11:30.”

“And you didn’t go out between, say 3:00 or 4:00 A.M.?”

Beth allowed her face to register surprise. “Hardly. Even if I had any place to go at that time, which I don’t, I’d never leave the kids alone in the house in the middle of the night. The most I ever leave them is an hour or so after school or in the early evening. Otherwise, I get a sitter.”

“Okay. This is just routine. We always have to know where people are.”

“I understand.” Beth looked down for a second. “If you’re finished, can you tell me where Marie is? May I see her?”

The police investigator looked at her strangely. “She’s at her apartment. A doctor gave her a sedative so she may still be asleep.”

“Thank you. I hope she’ll be all right. It’s such a shock, happening like this.”

“Yes.”

“She was there, too. She would have seen it.”

“She didn’t see him killed. Heard the shot and went out to find him dead. If it’s any consolation, he died instantly.”

“Oh, that’s good,” Beth allowed herself a short sigh. “I’d hate for him to have suffered.” She paused. “But that means—did anyone see who did it?”

“Apparently not.”

“So how will you find out?” Without waiting for an answer, she began to cry again, groping in her purse for a Kleenex.

The policewoman pulled a couple from a box on her desk.

“I expect you’re used to it,” Beth sniffed a minute later. “People dying, I mean.”

“No, you’re wrong. You simply learn to put the facts ahead of how it affects you.”

“Yes. I see. Like just now I realized I have to protect my children, so I can’t fall apart.”

“That’s right.”

“Even though we’re divorcing, it doesn’t mean I don’t—didn’t still care what happens to him.”

“Of course. But what about other people? Can you think of anyone—business associates, relatives, anyone at all—who might have a motive for killing your husband?”

“No. No, I can’t think of anyone. He was just ordinary. He worked for a computer business. He was a good salesman. A good man. The idea of someone’s wanting to kill him is ridiculous. It must have been a burglar. No one hated Frank. I guess I had the most reason to, but even I didn’t. He wasn’t the kind of person you hated. Everyone loved Frank.”

The policewoman stood up, and Beth noticed the wrinkles in her pant legs. Cheap polyester. And not a good colour for her.

“Do you want someone to go home with you?” the woman asked, now speaking in the tone of another woman instead of that of a hard-nosed cop.

“Oh, no! Just find out who did this. I’ll be okay.”

Beth left the building and drove her car to Marie’s condominium. She took the elevator up to the 22nd floor and rang the bell. A nurse answered.

“Is Marie here? Could I see her for just a moment? Please?”

“Are you a relative?” The woman, who looked to be in her early sixties, spoke with a pronounced Scottish accent.

“Not exactly,” Beth replied, “but we share very close ties.”

“Well, she’s still drowsy from the medication the doctor gave. I guess she was hysterical. Terrible, shocking thing to have happen. Her thoughts are very confused. She seems to think Mr. Dalton is in the next room.”

“I’ll just stay a moment,” Beth said as she pushed past the nurse.

Marie was lying on the big queen-sized bed in her bedroom. Beth wondered how Frank liked the large roses plastered all over the walls, curtains, and duvet. And the perfume. You were hit by it the second you walked into the room. Lilac or something. Frank never wanted her to wear perfume. Said it bothered his allergies. Idly, she wondered how many times Frank had been in this room. She shook her head. What did it matter now?

She stepped closer to the bed, taking in Marie’s tousled red hair and matching cheeks, swollen eyes, wet pillow.... Gently, Beth said, “I know this is rough for you, Marie. It’s mind-boggling. I don’t know who would do this. But if you need me, I’m here for you. Anything. Anytime. I just want you to know.”

Marie’s half-open eyes flickered, her mouth moved, but Beth said, “No, don’t try to talk. I know you need rest. I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am this happened. Just when you and Frank were going to be so happy together, too.”

“I’ll come by tomorrow when you might feel more like company. And we’ll plan the funeral then. We’ll do it together.”

Marie's hand groped the air. Beth took it and soothingly, the way she would with her children when they were sick, patted it. "You'll be okay. You'll see. Everything will be okay."

Five minutes later, the nurse let Beth out, thanking her profusely for coming to show Marie she had friends. "Poor girl. Mother dead and father apparently never around. Good she isn't all alone."

Beth went home, stopping only at the drug store to pick up something for the headache she was rapidly developing.

Later that day, she heard on the news that Marie Friesen had been arrested. Apparently, Frank was also seeing a girl named Elsa whom he'd met in a bar. A letter from her was found in Marie's desk at the school where she taught grade six. The revolver, found where it might have landed if thrown from the apartment window, was registered to Frank.

At the trial, Beth, in tears, admitted that Frank had taken the gun when he moved out of the house.

Marie's ex-boyfriend Trent Cummings, a policeman she had dumped for Frank, reluctantly admitted under cross-examination that Marie got jealous easily, and that she once threw a heavy pitcher at him in a fit of anger because she'd seen him talking to another woman.

And Elsa, the attractive blonde from a near-by bar, tearfully swore Frank had told her he'd marry her as soon as his divorce became final.

Marie's lawyer called a young woman from the same apartment building to testify. She said she'd been buzzed about a telegram that night, and after waiting for someone to show up, went back to sleep. She thought the voice was male. But there was only her word, and she was pretty hazy. Under cross-examination, she admitted she wasn't sure it hadn't been a dream. Or that it was even that night.

Marie was called to the stand, but she became hysterical, protesting her innocence through a stream of tears, claiming she had been awakened by the ringing of the doorbell, that she stayed in bed while Frank answered the door, that she heard the shot but was too frightened to come out at first, and that when she did venture into the living room, Frank was dead. She said the only person who wanted Frank dead was Beth. And she'd never heard of Elsa.

The nurse told them of Beth's concern for Marie. And there was the letter to prove Marie was lying about Elsa.

Marie was found guilty and sentenced to life.

When the reporters flocked around her, Beth said she was glad Frank's murder was avenged. No, she didn't hate Marie. She felt sorry for the girl. It never paid to do things without thinking. Someone always got hurt. Yes, it

was a shame Frank was the kind of man who never seemed to be satisfied. But some men were like that. Yes, the lawyers said Frank hadn't altered his will, so, since they were still legally married, she would inherit his estate as well as the insurance money. Yes, Frank Dalton was very wise in his investments. The kids would have everything they needed.

Beth went home and baked a cake. Then she took out hamburger patties for supper and began buttering buns. Her mind drifted back to the night Frank had first told her about Marie. She was in the kitchen then, too, cutting up ham. Her first thought was to stab him in the heart the way his words were stabbing her. But her mind rejected that impulse, and she accepted his betrayal calmly. They even sat and talked after supper, making decisions about ending the marriage. About the children. He really did care about them.

It was all fate after that. Trent Cummings coming to the door. Saying he'd found Robbie wandering around five blocks away and was worried he'd get lost. So what if Robbie protested that he knew his way. A six-year-old kid shouldn't go so far from home.

She asked Trent in, and only then discovered their strange relationship. She understood his anger at being dumped by Marie the same way she had been dumped by Frank. She was amazed to learn Trent had been following Frank and knew about this other girl, Elsa.

It had all worked out so well. As if it were fate. Wherever Frank was, and she knew it wasn't heaven, he knew now that he couldn't get away with what he'd done to her. And Marie had learned a valuable lesson about stealing other peoples' husbands.

The kids and Beth were taken care of financially. Who knew what would have happened if Marie had managed to get her hooks on Frank's bank account? Beth knew several women who'd lost everything because their husbands refused to pay a decent alimony, or stopped payment once they had new families.

It was so easy. Trent helped her come up with a foolproof plan, showed her how to use the revolver, stole a car for her, and then later ditched it at the other end of the city. And all he wanted was for her to give him one-third of the insurance money and make a new will leaving him half of her estate.

She would give him the insurance money as soon as it came. She had made out the will and given him a copy. But naturally, she wouldn't leave the will that way. She'd see her lawyer tomorrow and make a new one. Trent wouldn't know for years. Maybe never.

She put the meat patties in to broil and began setting the table. The kids would be hungry. But before she called them, she would have a quick drink from her bottle in the flour bin, just to calm her nerves. Not much left.

She drank it all and set the bottle in the recycling bin. Maybe she'd stop buying the stuff. She shouldn't need it any more. The cause of her stress was gone.

Only one thing bothered her. Frank seemed so sincere about marrying Marie. In fact, that's what hurt the most. She could have forgiven a brief fling, but not the knowledge that another woman had taken her place. Learning about Elsa was a terrific shock. It just didn't seem reasonable that Frank would cheat on Marie so quickly. Yet why would Elsa lie?

The buzzer began to sound. The hamburgers needed turning. She took a step forward and the room began to spin. She grabbed for the counter but missed and fell to her knees. She noticed a paper that must have been wedged in beside the flour bin and fallen when she opened it. The paper now lay open on the floor. Beth's eyes saw the words and she tried to read them, but they meant nothing to her.

After several spasms, she lay still. The buzzer continued to sound and smoke slowly filled the room.

The police found the paper after Beth's son Tim called 911. It declared Beth's inability to live any longer without Frank, with whom she was hoping to reconcile, and it was signed with Beth's name.

The police shook their heads and talked about the pity of it all. They thought it was a waste and wondered if she had planned it weeks before when she asked for the prescription for Dilantin—she seemed to have used virtually the whole bottle.

Why she would do it with the kids home and supper cooking—? Likely didn't realize it would act so quickly.

Of course, the police never knew that Frank had told Marie about Beth's gin bottle in the flour bin, or that Marie mentioned it when she told Trent it was over between them. Or that Beth had written the letter in a fit of anger a week before, then changed her mind about giving it to Frank, but left it on her nightstand for Trent to find when he had searched the house. Nor did the police know that Marie had boasted to Trent about how much money Frank was worth.

The police did think it strange when Beth's new will was read and Trent inherited half of the estate. But Trent had a ready explanation. A while back, he'd found her youngest kid when he was lost, and taken him home. He knew Mrs. Dalton was grateful, but he never suspected she was this grateful.

Anyway, Trent had an iron-clad alibi for the time of Frank's murder. He was with three other officers stopping a crazed man who was threatening to kill his wife and two kids. And when Beth Dalton died in her kitchen, Trent was miles away taking a couple of inner city kids to a farm. Nothing on Trent.

Besides, he was a good cop. Always out there putting his life on the line. Just his luck some lady wrote him into her will! Maybe she had a thing for cops.

Just like that other girl, Elsa. Fancy their meeting at the trial and falling head over heels in love. They were married before the month was up.

Lucky guy.

Too bad they found out later that she was HIV positive.

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