

Dark Reunion

by

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Laurie arrived at the reunion alone. David had begged off, saying he didn't even plan on going to his own reunion, but encouraging her to go and have a good time. "Those things can dredge up a lot of adolescent garbage," he'd said. Later, his words would come back to haunt her.

When she was dressed, she did a little whirl in front of him, and was rewarded with a whistle. "Hey, I'm not so sure I should let you go alone. You look too damn good."

"You don't think it's too short."

"Yeah, actually I do. Why don't you wear your old plaid nightshirt over it? It's in your drawer. I'll get it."

She laughed and kissed him goodbye.

It was an hour's flight from Halifax to Saint John. She took a cab from her mother's. And now that she was here, she wasn't sure why. She'd never been in the clique, part of the "in-crowd." Still, there were a few people she was looking forward to seeing again. Dodie, her best friend, wouldn't be here; she'd gotten her nursing degree and moved to the states.

The gym was bright and noisy, festive with red and blue balloons (the school colors), streamers and flowers. A mingling of perfumes and good food wafted to her as she scanned the crowd for a familiar face. She spotted Harold Thomas across the room, doing a slow move to the beat of Barry Manilow's Mandy blaring from the sound system. He held a glass of punch in his hand, and his eyes were closed. Laurie smiled, remembering. Short and squat, Harold was never much to look at, but he was a terrific dancer. The girls had stood in line to dance with him. "Me next, Harold. You promised." She'd seen his picture in the paper a few times over the years. He'd made a success of himself in the insurance business. He didn't look any different, just older.

She turned to see a woman in a purple pantsuit rushing toward her, smiling hugely, finally wrapping her in a warm Chanel fragrant embrace. "My God, Laurie Stevens, dark and adorable as ever. You look the same as you did in high school." She held her at arm's length. "You have no idea who in the hell I am, do you?"

Well, I..." Laurie wracked her brain.

"Can't blame you. I've put on a few pounds. I'm..."

"Alice Moore," Laurie jumped in, grateful to have remembered. "Of course I do. It's great to see you again," she said, meaning it. "How are you?"

"Not so bad. The name's Dowling now. Divorced," she added with an apologetic shrug.

Alice had always been a warm, friendly person, but fiercely competitive, especially in sports. Both women turned as a male voice greeted them. Laurie recognized that sexy, boyish grin at once. She'd had such a crush on Aaron Hamilton, while all he could see was blond, popular Jillian Thorne. He was still tall and good-looking, but his thick sandy hair was a thing of the past. He got in a couple of bald jokes before anyone else could. Other people joined them,

and at some point they all gravitated toward the buffet table, in particular, the punch bowl. Someone said it was generously laced.

Aaron related the story of the time when meek, soft-spoken Miss Ruth Bell grabbed Derek Speight (a foot taller than her) by the front of his shirt, and slammed him up against the blackboard. Derek was always cutting up in class, but for some reason on this particular Monday morning he'd pressed her wrong (or right, depending on how you looked at it) buttons. He'd put up a hand to defend himself, and Miss Bell said, in an unintentional Clint Eastwood impression, "I know karate. Don't fool with me, boy."

A howl of laughter went up around the table. Aaron always could tell a story. Back then, of course, they'd dared only a few nervous giggles behind their books. And Eastwood wasn't yet a household name.

Someone said Derek died of a heart attack last year, and the laughter trickled off.

Laurie had just bitten a cube of cheddar off a toothpick when she saw Jillian Thorne heading in their direction, looking like something out of vogue in a yellow strapless number, her handsome doctor husband in tow. The local paper did a big spread when she married heart surgeon, Doctor Eric Wilson. Laurie thought he looked uncomfortable. The way David would have looked if he'd come.

Within minutes Jillian grabbed center stage, just like in the old days. She kept touching Aaron's arm while she talked animatedly. Laurie felt herself go quiet inside, just like she used to when Jillian was anywhere near her. You're a grown woman with two grown children, she reminded herself. It didn't help. David was right. There was something slightly masochistic about these things. She drifted off with her glass of punch, a half-smile on her face. I'll give it an hour. Then I'm out of here.

"Hello, Laurie."

Laurie turned to see a stunning woman in a caramel silk suit-dress, the skirt coming nearly to her ankles, the shirt loose and flowing, smiling tentatively at her. Straight auburn hair ending just below her ears gleamed like satin under the lights. "Elegant" was the word that came to mind. Laurie stared hard, but nothing clicked in. "I'm sorry, I ...it's my eyes. I don't see as well as..."

The woman smiled and put out a hand. "You always were so nice. Always caring of other people's feelings."

Now that they were standing face to face, Laurie sensed something familiar about the woman. She has beautiful eyes, clear as crystal pools.

"You probably don't remember me. I'm Margaret Dross."

For a moment, Laurie couldn't answer. "Margaret," she said at last, trying not to look as stunned as she felt. "Of course - I remember you. You look fabulous. What are you doing now? Are you married? Is your husband with you?" My God, I can't believe this woman is the same girl who sat at the back of the room, with the stringy hair and glasses and those tiny eyes behind them practically lost in all that flesh. So painfully shy, far worse than I ever was. And that mother - always coming to the school to make sure she came directly home, ranting at her within everyone's hearing. Someone told her Mrs. Dross was a religious fanatic.

"No to both your questions," Margaret said. "I still live with my mother on Douglas Avenue. She's not so well these days. I work as a bookkeeper with Howe and Rivers, a law firm. I have my own office in the back. A cubbyhole, actually, but I like it."

That's great, Margaret. You were always a whiz at math."

"I like the way I can make things come out even in the end," she smiled.

Laurie had a flash memory of Margaret walking alone the school corridor, shoulders hunched forward, shoelaces clicking on the polished floor.

A peal of laughter drifted from the buffet table. "I can use a little more of that punch, Margaret. How about you?" She touched a hand to the woman's shoulder. "Makes things more tolerable. Come on. I bet you haven't eaten anything, either."

Margaret drew back, a trace of fear coming into her face. "No, it's okay. I'm not really hungry. You go ahead, though. I think I'll just walk around a little." She smiled again as she moved away. "You look really pretty, Laurie. That color of blue matches your eyes."

Laurie understood her reluctance to go into the lion's den. School couldn't have been much fun for Margaret. She was always alone. Sometimes Laurie would seek her out, share her sandwich. So why is she here, Laurie wondered, if not to show off how great she looks now? Damn, I really want Jillian to see her. I want Jillian's husband to see her. Nasty, Laurie. Nasty.

When she returned to the table to refill her glass, the good doctor was just pocketing his pager, apologizing for having to rush off, leaving Jillian with a long-suffering smile on her face. Laurie thought he looked secretly relieved, and wondered if maybe he hadn't arranged to be called away.

You have such a devious mind, Laurie Stevens Dobson.

Laurie didn't see Margaret again until she was leaving. A few taxis were lined up in front of the building. Margaret caught up with her as she was going down the wide cement steps.

"Hi, Laurie. I have my car here. Can I give you a ride?"

"Well, thanks, but I don't know if it's on your way..."

"It doesn't matter. I don't have anywhere special to go. I guess you're staying with your mom while you're here, huh? Is she still on Visart?"

"Yes, I'm surprised you remem..."

"I remember a lot of things, Laurie. It's that blue station-wagon right there." She unlocked and opened the door. "Hop in."

"Well, thanks, Margaret, this is great." Laurie slid into the passenger seat. The car smelled faintly of dry-cleaning, leather and Vick's cough drops. "This is really sweet of you. I appreciate it. And it will give us a chance to get caught up."

"You have two boys," Margaret said, smiling, surprising Laurie yet again. "Your husband's into computers." She switched on the ignition, and the car purred to life. "I never did find Mr. Right. What with the job and taking care of Mom there hasn't been much time for socializing."

"Oh," Laurie said, nodding, wondering why they were just sitting here with the motor running. When she felt something hard pressing into her ribs, she looked down, thinking it was probably the buckle of an errant seatbelt. Seeing the gun in Margaret's hand, she felt only bewilderment. And then she thought maybe it was some kind of weird "reunion" joke. Until she looked up, into Margaret's eyes. "Margaret, what are...?"

"Just be calm, Laurie. It's not you I want to hurt. You were always nice to me. I didn't know quite how I was going to manage to get Jillian into the car, but it's all worked out well. Her husband being called away like that was a stroke of luck. Yes, there she is now, just coming out of the building. Call her, Laurie. Tell her we'll give her a ride wherever she's going."

"Margaret, don't do this. This is crazy..."

"Call her, Laurie." The gun jabbed her ribs, making her wince. "Call her before she gets into that taxi or you'll be sorry."

Past the tightness in her throat, Laurie called to Jillian out the passenger window. The smell of the Atlantic and the oil refinery east of the city came in the window on the warm May air. Say no, Jillian. Be the snooty bitch you always were and say no. But she didn't say no. In fact, after peering in the window she smiled her cheerleader smile and hopped into the back seat. "This is great. Thanks a million. I thought I'd be able to get a lift with Aaron, but he's got someone coming to pick him up. His wife. Hey, it's still early, ladies. Why don't we all go for a drink? I know a place that has a terrific little jazz band."

Jillian sounded as if she'd already dipped into the punch bowl a time too many. "That sounds like a fun idea, doesn't it, Margaret?"

Margaret shot her a look. Laurie fell silent.

"Margaret?" Jillian leaned over the back seat to closer scrutinize her driver. "I can't remember any Margaret in our class except for .." She let out a small chuckle and Laurie's stomach sank. "But she's obviously not you, dear. Whose class were you in?"

The car bolted forward, nearly striking the taxi in front; the driver made an obscene gesture at them. Margaret didn't slow down until they were halfway up Main Street, then she made a sharp right, pulling into an alley between a barber shop and the Army Surplus. She turned in her seat, trained the gun on Jillian.

"You get in the passenger seat, Jillian. Laurie, you drive. I'll get in the back."

"What is this?" Jillian said, indignant. "Is this some kind of sick jo..." Before she could complete the sentence, Margaret struck out with the gun. At the sickening crack, Laurie instinctively made a grab for the weapon. And in the next instant found herself staring down the barrel.

"Don't be stupid, Laurie."

"Okay," Laurie whispered, drawing back. She glanced behind her to see Jillian sitting with her hand pressed against her cheek, weeping softly. A rivulet of dark blood ran down between her fingers. "Why?" she whimpered. "Who are you?"

"I'm getting out now," Margaret said, with deadly softness. "You get in the passenger seat, Jillian, like I told you."

The alley was so narrow there was barely room for them to squeeze through the doors, but at last they were all in their assigned places.

Jillian sat beside her, still clutching her face, but she had stopped crying. The clock on the dash said 10:55 p.m. Laurie told her mom she'd be home by eleven, or call if she just happened to be having too good a time. Right.

Back it out slow," Margaret said in her ear. Laurie felt the heat of the gun on the back of her head.

Five minutes later they were turning into a paved drive on Douglas Avenue. You couldn't see the colour of the house at night, but Laurie knew it was white, Victorian-style, fronted by a high cedar hedge, ancient elms, like sentinels, on either side. She'd passed it many times on her way to the museum, though she never knew that Margaret lived here.

Margaret ushered them into the foyer. Even before she switched on the light, Laurie could smell the dark mustiness of the house, the oppressiveness. The smell of Vick's was in the air. And something else - something dark, deeper, that Laurie couldn't discern.

Limp, yellowing doilies caressed the backs and arms of overstuffed furniture. A dust-covered piano stood against the far wall. The rug Laurie stood on was Oriental, its design barely visible. A grandfather clock stood in the corner beneath the staircase, its pendulum still.

Margaret reached for their coats as pleasantly as if this were a social call she and Jillian were making, and Margaret was the welcoming hostess. She's mad, Laurie thought. Margaret is stark, raving mad. As she began to unbutton her beige trench coat she considered whipping it at Margaret in an attempt to knock the gun from her hand. But what if she missed? The gun in her old classmate's hand was as steady as those contact-lens emerald eyes. The moment when Laurie might have done something came and went. She would wait for a better opportunity, catch her off-guard, she thought, as Margaret paraded them at gunpoint through a small hallway into the kitchen.

She shoved Jillian into a hard-back chair near an old-fashioned wood burning stove that took up most of one wall. David had an avid interest in antiques; he would have loved this stove - this house, in fact.

Margaret handed Laurie a length of white cord from the table which stood in front of the window. A green window blind shut out the world. "Tie her up."

A light bulb hung from the ceiling by a chain, casting the kitchen in greasy light. Laurie saw the narrow back door; it was bolted. She wondered how long it would take her to release the bolt. What was out there? A shed? Another locked door? Booby traps?

Dishes were piled in a chipped enamel sink. The place smelled.

"She was always a lazy, demanding woman," Margaret said, as if reading Laurie's thoughts. "She made me do all the housework when I was in school, and even after I went out to work. You can see I've become quite slovenly of late. I apologize for that. But I've grown to hate this house so much, I can't bear to put a dustcloth to it...I said tight, Laurie," Margaret grabbed the cord from Laurie's hands, gave it a hard yank that made Jillian cry out. "Use a little elbow grease, as my dear Momma use to say." Margaret giggled, and the sound sent chills along Laurie's spine.

With silent apology, averting her eyes from Jillian's, Laurie drew the rope taut around those pale, thin wrists.

"Good. Now wind the cord around those two back middle rungs, and knot it double. Then do her ankles."

Jillian was trying for her old arrogant expression and failing miserably. You could see she was terrified. She isn't the only one, Laurie thought. Blood seeped from the cut on Jillian's cheekbone. Smears of it had dried on the front of her yellow dress. For the first time ever, Laurie felt sorry for Jillian.

As Laurie was making the final knot, Margaret suddenly stepped forward and grabbed a handful of Jillian's hair and snapped her head back. 'How does it feel? How does it feel to be trapped, Jillian? To feel yourself at someone else's mercy? But you had no mercy, did you, Jillian?'

Blood pounded hot in Laurie's own ears at the sound of Jillian's sobs and pleas. "Please, I have money. My husband will..."

"Shut up!"

The room was silent, waiting.

I have to do something. That "just right moment" wasn't going to present itself just for her convenience. If there was to be any opportunity for escape, she would have to create it. Though Margaret's attention was on Jillian, she also kept a wary eye on Laurie. Laurie wondered if she could overtake her. It wasn't likely. Margaret was bigger, certainly taller, and probably a hell of a lot stronger, much of her strength born of rage. Maybe if Jillian hadn't been tied up, the two of them together...

This is a nightmare, isn't it? Any second now I'll wake up and Mom and I will laugh about this dream I'm having. You read about this sort of thing. You saw it played out on the movie screen while you filled your face with popcorn. But it never happened to you, or to anyone connected with you.

Laurie steeled herself. "Margaret, I have to go to the bathroom. All that punch, you know..." She tried to smile.

"Sure, Laurie." She waved the gun in the direction of the living room. "Upstairs, second door on the left."

"It's okay then if..."

"Of course."

Taken aback at having had her request so readily granted, she mumbled her thanks and went through the hallway with tentative steps, half thinking that it was a trick and that any second a bullet would slam into her back. She didn't let out her breath until she was out of Margaret's view.

The front door seemed a mile away, as if she were looking at it through the wrong end of a telescope. She was sure Margaret hadn't locked it.

Her coat was draped over the sofa-back with Jillian's. She tiptoed toward it, grateful for the silent carpet beneath her feet. She wouldn't stop running until she got to the hotel, then she'd call the police. She reached for her coat.

"I'll kill her the minute you close the door after you, Laurie," Margaret called out, as calmly as if she were asking her to pick up a loaf of bread on the way. For one shameful instant Laurie asked herself what Jillian had ever done for her that she should leave her own life in danger. Then she turned and resignedly went up the stairs.

Laurie quickly checked the two bedrooms on the right. The second room smelled more strongly of Vick's and just faintly of rosewater. An open Bible lay on the night table. Beside it, nearly hidden by wads of Kleenex, was a phone. Heart racing, Laurie eased the receiver from its cradle and put it to her ear. There was a kind of "whooshing" sound, like you heard when you listened into a seashell. Laurie pressed the button a couple of times, trying to get a dial tone. She'd call her mom. It was the only number she could recall at the moment.

Suddenly, the "whooshing" stopped, replaced by the terrifying sound of Margaret's voice. "Hang it up, Laurie."

Laurie's heart shot into her throat. "Margaret. I was just calling my mom. She'll be worr..."

"Hang it up. Now. You've got two minutes to get down here. You really disappoint me, Laurie. I thought you understood." The phone clicked off.

A green enamelled clawfoot tub dominated the bathroom. A plastic curtain was drawn across it. After the shock of hearing Margaret's voice on the phone, Laurie really did have to go. Seated there, listening to the slow drip, drip, drip of water into the tub, something - something, made her reach out and take an edge of curtain in her hand and draw it back - slowly, very slowly, as if in some part of her mind she already knew what she would find.

The woman's splayed feet were revealed to her first. They were swollen, with dark bluish toenails that badly needed cutting. Her mottled flesh was white as bread dough. Laurie did not remember her being such a large woman. Mrs. Dross would not have fit in Laurie's small apartment-sized tub. Pale eyes stared up at her from beneath a skim of water. Her mouth was slightly open, to reveal loose dentures. Tendrils of wispy grey hair floated about her face.

She managed to draw the curtains across. In the hallway she closed her eyes and sagged against the wall. The image of the corpse remained behind her lids. She fought to keep from passing out. Bile rose bitter in her throat. She had to get hold of herself. Margaret mustn't know I saw her. Oh, my God, she murdered her mother.

Jillian was sitting docilely in the chair, watching Laurie enter the kitchen. She was drawn, and so pale Laurie could see the scars at the corner of her eyes from her eyelift. The tears had washed away the makeup. The cut on her cheekbone was swollen and discolored.

I have to do something.

"Could we have tea - or coffee?" Laurie asked, forcing a smile at their captor. "You've been terribly hurt, Margaret. We need to talk about it."

"Talking won't make the dreams go away. You don't know what she did to me, Laurie."

"I think I do."

"Did you know she took pictures of me in the gym shower and showed them around the school?"

Laurie had a vague recollection of talk surrounding the incident. She wouldn't have been one of the people shown the pictures. She shook her head.

"People whispered and laughed behind my back. The boys said ugly, horrible things to me, right out. I told my mother, but she just said I must have done something to deserve it. She said it was punishment from God...No, no tea or coffee, Laurie. Sorry. There won't be time."

"I didn't mean any harm, Margaret," Jillian said in a small voice. "It was all in fun. We were kids. I never even thought of it again."

Whatever she had to drink, she's sober now. "Fun for you, maybe" Laurie said, turning on a startled Jillian. "You were always one who liked having a laugh at someone else's expense. You need to understand what you did. You need to atone." Please, please let this work.

Jillian twisted in the chair. The tears came again. "Why are you ganging up with her?"

"Why not? You always travelled with your little gang." Laurie glanced at the owl clock on the wall. Mom will be looking for me by now. She'll be putting on water for tea, wanting to hear all about the evening. Would she get to tell her?

"One thing I did always wonder about," Margaret said, lowering the gun a little. "Why me, Jillian? Why were you so cruel? What did I ever do to make you hate me so much?"

"Nothing. I didn't hate you. I didn't..."

Laurie thought that was probably true. Margaret had meant nothing to Jillian. She was as insignificant as a fly on the windowsill, except as a target, an amusement.

"Do you remember daring Jason Belding to ask me to the school dance, Jillian?"

"No," she whispered.

"I thought he really liked me. Oh, at first I couldn't believe he actually wanted to take me out, but he was really nice. He said he couldn't pick me up because he had to work late, but that he'd meet me at the dance. I spent all my baby-sitting money on a new dress. It was the first time I dared to wear lipstick. I had to sneak out of the house. When I got there, he was with someone else, one of your friends. He looked kind of embarrassed, like he felt bad. You had this smirk on your face, so I knew right away you pushed him to do it. Everyone always wanted to please you, Jillian. You had it all. Everything your way."

"You're wrong, Margaret," Jillian said. "You..."

"Do you remember following me one day?" Margaret went on. "Chanting 'here pig here pig, oink, oink'," Margaret hunched over, crossed the floor and back, as she mimicked the ugly

words that would never leave her. For an instant, looking at her, Laurie was reminded of Sally Fields in the role of Sybil. "Do you remember that?" Margaret asked, stopping.

Jillian shifted her eyes.

She remembered. As did Laurie. She'd tried to make them stop, but they wouldn't. She could still hear the stomp, stomp, stomp of those feet following behind Margaret's, marking time with the hateful chant. The momentum and volume seemed to take on a life of its own. It was horrible. And then Margaret lost her rhythm, stumbled and fell on the broken sidewalk. She was crawling around, sobbing, feeling about for her glasses. Laurie picked them up out of the gutter and helped her up. Her knees and hands were bleeding. Jillian and her pals had gone off, laughing.

"It was twenty years ago, for God's sake, Margaret," Jillian said, to Laurie's utter amazement. "You should be over it by now."

"Over it?" Margaret said quietly.

Jillian strained against the ropes. "Do it then," she cried. "Just go ahead and get it over with. Maybe it will make you feel better to know my life is crap these days. My 15-year old daughter ran away six months ago because she hates me, and I have no idea where the hell she is. My husband is divorcing me to marry some little slut nurse at the hospital. And I'm well on my way to becoming a full-fledged alcoholic. So if you want to kill me, Margaret, then please, please, just do it. The truth be known, you'd be doing me a favor."

Confusion came into Margaret's face. Who would have thought Jillian Thorne's life could be anything but perfect?

"You would punish her more by letting her live. Margaret, you don't want to hurt anyone. You'd be no better than your tormentors, then. You'd be no better than Jillian. Don't you see that? Please, give me the gun."

"She was all I had. She's gone now."

She's talking about her mother. She knows I saw her. "What happened, Margaret? What made you...?"

Margaret looked momentarily bewildered then her eyes widened in surprise. "I didn't do anything, Laurie. I wouldn't hurt my mother. I love her. She had a heart attack. I - found her when I got home from work today. The doctor kept telling her she needed to lose weight, but she wouldn't listen."

It hadn't occurred to Laurie she'd died of natural causes. Relieved, she said, "We should call an ambulance."

"Don't you think it's a little late for that?"

"They'd take her to the morgue. Or we could call the police."

"Not yet. I'm dead too, you know. So she has to die. Because of her I have nothing. No one."

"Margaret, you're not dead. You were a victim of childish cruelty, but it's over now. You could have your pick of men. Take a look at yourself in the mirror, girl. You could be a model."

Margaret smiled thinly. "It's a costume."

Her words hung in the air.

"I'm sorry, Margaret," Jillian said. "I didn't know..."

"Sure you did." She raised the gun.

It was now or never. Not daring to give it further thought, Laurie went into a crouch, dived at Margaret, pulling off a tackle Joe Namath would have been proud of. The gun flew out

of Margaret's hand and slid across the linoleum floor under the table. Laurie rolled off Margaret, scrambled after it, banged her knee on the table leg.

Margaret's hand clamped around her ankle, tried to drag her back, but too late. Flinging herself on her back, Laurie gripped the gun with both hands, aimed it squarely at Margaret.

Margaret's eyes filled. "I thought you were my friend, Laurie."

"I am," she gasped, removing one hand from the gun to rub the fire from her knee. "Believe me, I am."

It was after two in the morning when she arrived at her mother's in a taxi. Officer Jason Belding had offered to have someone drive her, but she knew it would frighten her mother to see her pull up in a police car. Jason had assured her that Margaret wouldn't serve any jail time, since no one was interested in pressing charges. True to form, once Jillian knew she was safe she was ready to throw Margaret to the wolves, but Laurie convinced her she owed her a break.

Margaret would get the help she needed and deserved. Jason thought she would be allowed to attend her mom's funeral, escorted of course. Laurie planned to be there, too. She would call David in the morning and explain.

"You really must have had a great time," her mother said, busying herself with teapot and cups, despite the hour. "Tell me everything."

Laurie smelled freshly baked chocolate chip cookies. Her favorite.

There but for the grace of God -- and Mom.

"You wouldn't believe it. You just wouldn't believe it."

The End

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