

## Poetic License

by Lindsey Duncan

*Lindsey Duncan is a life-long writer and professional Celtic harp performer who feels that music and language are inextricably linked. She lives and performs in Cincinnati, Ohio and is a student at Indiana University working on a self-designed major. She has been published several times, including in OG's Speculative Fiction.*

*In a school that doesn't really exist, where fictional characters learn their roles and hone their craft, someone has been murdered—for real.*

By the time I reached the scene, the body of Sebastian Argyll, lead professor in the poetry department, had begun to fade into the never-happened from which he had come. I snapped pictures, took measurements, and cursed the lack of mystery students when one was needed. Most of them were out on a tour of real-world strip clubs for Settings and Scene 206, a part of the course that not coincidentally had a high level of professorial oversight. I had no such background. I had dropped out of the historicals genre twelve years ago when the Academy filled its quota of fictive Queen Elizabeths, both I and II.

Sebastian was a reedy man with defiantly unthinned hair and a real passion for his work, despite its position as the dregs of the Literary Academy. While some of its students might go on to inspire sonnets and great works, most ended up in the undemanding position of a bit of doggerel, fleeting fame but easy permanence in the real world. Sebastian, though...if every student lived up to his standards, the world would have walked and breathed iambic pentameter.

I headed up to the dean's office with a set expression. I had taken over from the last security chief three years ago and never had a murder before. For all of us—people who were never born because of history's many unexpected turns, or who died too soon—the only existence left was training to become a fictional character, or serving those who were. The acceptance, or at least the tolerance, of the Academy meant the difference between life and oblivion.

His secretary showed me in without the usual interminable wait, which was alarming in of itself. The dean's office was a plush, exotic affair with a zebra-skin rug and an ostentatious quill and ink display, though like most of us, he did his work by computer.

"We're very concerned about this, Gabrielle," he said. "What can you tell us?"

"He was stabbed some time late last night. No way to tell the gender or handedness of the attacker. And he, uh..." This was the part I hated. "He's already faded significantly. If there were secondary wounds, fingerprints, any identifying marks, they're gone now."

"Lovely." The dean arched an eyebrow. "What do you propose to do now?" The storm clouds of wrath gathered in his voice, ready to thunder over the wrong

answer.

“I intend to speak to someone in the mystery genre, sir.”

“If you tell me that one of the butlers did it,” he snapped, “I’ll have you stripped of your credentials right now.”

“Not that,” I said, even more swiftly than I’d meant to, “I think one of the professors might be able to help me.”

He waved it off, dusting papers from his desk in the motion. Paperwork is immutable. Anyone who wants to be in a story with a paperless office joins the fantasy genre. “You’re in charge of security, and you already said there are no forensic remains.”

“Right, but one of the professors trains their future serial killers and hitmen. He knows a lot about the mindset.” I took a deep breath. “If he can put himself in the mind of whoever did this and come up with some idea of the circumstances, it might narrow the search.”

“What, the ... professor Dunmore?” The dean checked himself. “I don’t see why not.”

*You mean the Nutmaster?* I added silently. Seven years of teaching the fringe had made him a bit strange in self-defense, but I had never liked the nickname. “Thank you, sir.”

“One more thing, Gabrielle.” The storm was there, and I had little protection against it. “The Academy is built on the foundations of education and simulation ... never reality. If every barbarian practiced his hacking, if every thief thumbed through his roommate’s belongings, there would be absolute chaos. It is worth a lot to me to see this solved. It is, in fact, worth more than you are. Are we clear?”

My stomach seized. “I understand.”

\* \* \*

Wolfgang Dunmore, invariably Wolf even to freshmen, was a clean-cut, sharp-eyed man in his mid-thirties prone to none of the vices that seemed to permeate the genre faculty. He was built in one straight but solid line, neither blessed with much in the way of muscle nor cursed by hovering paunch. His hair was the color and rough consistency of caramel, usually sculpted by nothing more fancy than a comb of his fingers.

“So you’re absolutely sure Argyll didn’t commit one of those dramatic poet deaths?” was his first question for me as we met outside the office, or rather, the crime scene, as I had to think of it. “Didn’t cut off his own ear as a parting gesture?”

“That was a painter,” I said absently. “If it were anything like that, I wouldn’t need you.”

“Ouch. Cut to the quick.” Wolf chuckled, mocking a hurt expression.

I flashed him a droll grin. “You’re not my type. You’re too normal.” I’d known him for a long time. We’d shared a class on political intrigue before I lost my opportunity and before he was promoted to teaching, and kept in touch afterwards. I never understood why he passed up the chance to become someone’s great detective, a profiler perhaps, and I sometimes had the idea even he didn’t

know.

“Come on in,” I said, taking off the security locks.

He took a cursory inspection of his surroundings, saving the half-shadow of the corpse for last. “You realize I won’t be able to help you much,” he said. “The department only teaches techniques that can be understood by the layman in a couple of paragraphs. The rest comes from the authors. No cameras, I suppose?”

“Not in poetry.” I found it difficult to stand out of his way and fidgeted by the desk. “Or ...”

“I wouldn’t be here.” Wolf snorted. “No respect. No respect at all. Look,” he continued, “the weapon was here at hand. Letter-opener, I presume. Several wild stabs, no sign of a fight.”

“Can’t tell if he had defensive wounds,” I objected.

“Don’t need to. He’s too tidy.” Rogue amusement in his voice. “In fact, look at his position. Seems he didn’t even make it out of his chair. He slid out post-mortem.”

I hadn’t looked at it in that context, and blushed. “So what happened?”

Wolf continued as if he hadn’t heard me, pointing, waving, in complete command of the situation. As well he might. In a place like the Academy, he had far more experience with murder than I did. “It’s a textbook crime of passion,” he concluded. “Spur of the moment, more likely than not, if only because who would be mad enough to kill someone here, if they stopped and thought about it?”

“That makes sense,” I said. “I thought Argyll was well-liked.”

“He is, he is. Real literati, that one.” Wolf rubbed at the side of his nose. “But if there exists any person in this world or the real one who can please everyone all the time, I’ll eat my hat.”

“Not much of a sacrifice, considering you don’t own one.”

“Details, details.” But he grinned at me before vaulting over the desk. He landed in a crouch by the drawer. “You open this lock yet?”

“I was hoping to find the key.” I told myself there was no reason to be embarrassed. I was trying to do things by procedure. “I’m not sure it disappeared on the body yet.”

“Probably did,” he said, and without further warning, bashed it with the desk-side clock. After three blows and two startled protests from me, the lock broke. “There you are.”

I wasn’t sure whether to thank him or to take the clock and bop him in turn. I settled for rooting through the drawer, my face away from his. Private letters, musings, his own attempts at poetry, translations of famous works into other forms, among others.

Wolf draped himself on the desk, looking down. “This is important, isn’t it?” I nodded, even though it hadn’t been a question, and he continued, “I might be able to offer you another set of hands.”

“Thanks, Wolf,” I mumbled as I studied the pages. It was good stuff. So much for the old saying. “But you’re a bit conspicuous.”

“Not exactly a ninja yourself, red.” He chuckled a bit. “But I wasn’t talking about me. I have an exam to prepare. One of my older students, on the other hand, has a nose for these things. She might help you cover more territory.”

“Sounds fine.” I lifted the stack to my lap for further inspection, and a small card with calligraphy writing on it fell out. Feminine handwriting, classically spiraled. A piece of sweet nothing inscribed on it, a lover’s promise.

“Your enthusiasm overwhelms me.” He leaned in. “What do you have there?”

“A note from an Annalya,” I answered, then looked up with a weary smile. “Sorry. I just have a lot on my mind. If I don’t solve this...”

His brow quirked down. “The dean would throw you out?” He clapped a hand on my shoulder before I could answer. “Doubly important you solve this, then, and that you speak to this Annalya. Best of luck to you, and more than that, common sense.”

\* \* \*

A quick search of the Academy directory told me what I had half-expected. Annalya was a student, a junior specializing in sonnets.

Her class was in the computer labs studying urban archaeological reports on the nature of rhymed and literary graffiti. I sighed, hunted up my badge and credentials, and fisted my hair back into a braid that was supposed to be professional and at least managed schoolmarmish. It was almost the same thing, here.

I must have been lost in thought as I headed to the lab. I did not notice the young woman at my side until she spoke.

“Are you security?”

I jumped sideways in my skin. “I was a lot more secure five seconds ago!” the words blurted out of me. I immediately wished them unsaid.

My assailant was a young woman, slight, short, but with deceptively long limbs and a face that drew out into a basset hound’s mournful lines. Despite that, grey eyes were sharp and curious. She dressed completely in a black that matched her hair down to the faint shimmer of ebon-blue. Trademark character traits in the making, but subtly applied, a protagonist’s blend of unique.

“I’m Jordan,” she said. “Professor Dunmore said you might need my help.”

At this rate, her first task would be finding the shreds of my dignity. I shook her hand to cover my nerves and introduced myself. “Good to meet you. Can I ask you to talk to the junior professors? I take it if Wolf recommended you that you can be discreet.”

“Of course,” she said, cool and serious. “The best way to get an answer is to not ask the question.”

I looked at her sharply. “That sounds like Wolf.”

“It is,” she confirmed with a sudden smile that turned the hound’s face cherubic. “I flunked originality.”

It was played for laughs, and I couldn’t help but respond, far more at ease. “Meet me in my office at noon, then.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Those stork limbs stretched, and no sooner had she detoured than she vanished down the Academy halls.

The computer lab was a chessboard of dark screens and light, laid down in a dinghy framework of chairs and desks on the cheap. It was a monument to borderline obsolescence, filled with fierce students trying to stay on the working side

of that line. In the far corner was a cluster of students all in blue, and perfectly positioned at their center, old-fashioned skirt arrayed around her and blonde hair draped down one shoulder, a single young woman in lily pad green.

“You have to be kidding me,” I muttered. In a place where verisimilitude was a religion, my quarry seemed to be in some kind of surrealist cult. I waded through the pond of pupils. “Are you Annalya?”

She started to spin in her chair, then caught the underside of the desk with one hand and slowed to a gentler glide. “Yes, I am. Can I help you?” Her tones were honey, modulated, though they squeaked a bit when she saw my badge. “Is this about professor Argyll?” She was so choreographed that the falter was obvious. Pet nickname or first name familiarity, I didn’t particularly care to find out.

“I’m afraid it is. Can we speak privately?”

Only her training kept her from scrambling out of the lab as fast as toned cream limbs would take her. I watched her and shook my head. It was clear from her every move what her aspirations were. She wanted to inspire the poetry of love, to be the ideal phantom behind sonnets and odes. I knew from watching previous classes that she was going about it wrong, too much a type. Wasn’t Shakespeare’s Dark Lady black eyed and coarse? Love was rarely found in the obvious.

“What can I help you with?” Annalya hovered like a nervous butterfly.

Any number of oblique questions crowded my mind. I ignored them. Considering the penalties for professor-student affairs, I wouldn’t learn anything if she tried to lie, except that she had two brain cells to rub together. “How long had you and professor Argyll been seeing each other?”

She sucked in an opera-quality gust of air. “You don’t ask a person a question like that!” When the rosy blush began to fade from her cheeks, she continued, “Eight months. It was quite spontaneous. I like him. I do.” Her eyes flicked up, bright and anxious.

I did the math. Christmas party. Well, she wouldn’t be the only one. “I believe you,” I said. “I just need to know a few things.”

“He never influenced my grades.” She was firm, the words instant. “I never asked him to, he never offered, and I know he didn’t. He was a perfect gentleman, and my work is superlative. The romance genre tried to win me over. I said no.”

“Why?” The question was out before I could stop it.

Annalya lowered her eyes. “Bodice-rippers,” she demurred. “There’s no way to opt out.”

“Err, well.” I wondered if I should point out to her that some poetry crossed the same lines, but this was no time for career advice. “Where were you last night?”

“In bed. My roommate is a light sleeper,” she added defensively, clearly anticipating the next question.

As easy as it would have been to think otherwise, I thought I had to believe her. The fact that she had instantly assumed I wanted to talk to her about cheating, not Argyll’s death, weighed in her favor. Security doesn’t handle those cases, but most students don’t know the distinction.

“Is there anyone you can think of who might have had a problem with the professor?”

“Certainly not!” Annalya cried, then colored. “Of course, small things. Grades

thought to be unfair, projects misjudged, but nothing that would be worth killing for. He was a man incapable of arousing that kind of ire." A shy glow hovered in her cheeks.

I asked her a few more questions, but I could feel the answers slipping away from me. I excused myself and hunted up the roommate, who confirmed her story, "I went out into the hall to banter with some free verse majors, but I was leaning against our door and I was only out for about ten minutes."

Argyll's reputation seemed to hold. It was only after asking the same question ten times over that I finally got a different answer. "Well, there is Alexander."

"Alexander Pritchard, pantoums," he said in a firm voice when I approached him in his dorm lounge, "been working on my thesis for oh, ten months now."

"Pantoum," I said carefully. "The second and fourth lines of the verse become the first and third lines of the next one?"

"Got it in one." Alexander munched on an apple, doodling with the other hand. "Professor Argyll seemed to think there was little need for characters in them."

I nodded once and checked my notepad. "Let me see."

"You agree with him?" He tapped the pencil on the pages. "What can I help you with?"

I was very glad for the second question, for there was no good answer to the first. "I understand you had a long-standing conflict with the professor. What can you tell me about that?"

The change in his body was dramatic, muscles snapping, the wandering hands still. "I can tell you that an argument is a long distance from whatever happened to him," he said. "I can tell you that... what is wrong with you people?"

"It's just me," I said, somewhat taken aback, "and that wasn't an accusation. Perhaps—"

"Of course Argyll has, had, whatever, the first say when it comes to whether or not I'm even allowed to enter inspiration," he cut me off, "but he doesn't make the final call, not even! And I don't honestly know that I want to. I've been thinking about a teaching position. So you know..." he trailed off.

I knew that there was suddenly one open, so I avoided the question I wanted to ask. "Do you know Annalya?"

Alexander snorted. "Ah, the prima donna." He picked up the apple again and spun it between his fingers. "She really would do better in one of fantasy's ivory towers." Yet he wouldn't meet my eyes. Envious?

I led him through a few more questions before I came to the last. "What were you doing last night?"

"You mean besides stabbing him." He was quick, too quick, on the defensive. Too much? "Keg party. Half the hall was there."

Which meant, I suspected, no one would be wholly able to vouch for anything. "Thank you, Mr. Pritchard." A thin thread of pain worked its way between my eyes. I grimaced as I excused myself. If I could get back to the office and down one of my pills before it got worse...

"Ma'am?"

My foot jammed sideways and hit the molding. "Jordan! You just took years

off my life.”

“Sorry, ma’am.” Her tone was brisk as she offered me a notepad filled with tiny, anal-retentive letters. “Just some things I thought you ought to see. In particular, Argyll was teaching a crossover class with professor Banks in fantasy.”

“Epic poetry?” I guessed. “I don’t see the connection.”

Jordan mimed a shrug. “Well, Beowulf, dragons, burly men with swords.”

“But all of that is virtual,” I said. While most Academy technology went no further than the venerable computers, basic simulation had fallen out of a science fiction plot hole a long time ago and been incorporated into the training. It was prevalent in all genres, but the spec-fics had the lion’s share.

“The temptation is still there. Just my instinct.” She smiled a bit. “I wrote down the statements of the junior professors.”

My intended rush back to the office became a stroll of facts and figures, provided with encyclopedic ease by the young student. I was well and truly intimidated. I also found that I had to close my eyes to keep from wincing at the light, and by the time I reached the door, I could barely stand to listen to her voice.

“I need an hour,” I croaked.

Once inside, I fumbled to my desk and hunted out a migraine pill by feel. I set the alarm for an hour and tried, somehow, to set aside concerns about homicide long enough to sleep it off.

\* \* \*

I thrashed for nineteen minutes, not that I was staring at the clock, of course, and passed out for all of three when a foreign sound knocked me out of slumber. The shadows blurred around me, indistinct, and I started to close my eyes again.

The flash of light was subtle, almost unremarkable except for the accompanying stab of migraine pain. I jerked upwards with a startled cry, and distinctly heard the fabric of the couch rip as the slash of metal hit its flesh instead of mine.

I knew the attacker had to be human, because my dreams were always monochrome. It—he? She?—landed on the far side of the couch. I started to shout, what I decided later was an attention-grabbing bellow, and thought frantically around for my weapon.

The whites of eyes scored me in the muddy light as I realized the gun was wedged under my hip. I dropped sideways and reached for it.

In the second my eyes moved, my attacker was gone.

The door burst open, admitting two janitors and a junior who didn’t have time to consider just what, exactly, security couldn’t handle on her own. Jordan was with them.

“What happened?” The junior swung his books around menacingly. I had to duck to avoid being struck by a copy of *The Black Arts*. How appropriate.

Jordan was more effectual, across the room in a heartbeat, checking the windows, retrieving the weapon from the couch. A cafeteria knife. “Not very sharp,” she said. “Are you all right?”

“I’d be a lot less all right if it were.” I tried to make light of it even as I grimaced inwardly. Mother-henned by a student. I would have been more concerned if my