Famous Last Words

FAMOUS LAST WORDS

By Regan Black

Echelon Escape Paranormal Fiction

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3

1982

"Coffee's here, love." A firm hand on her shoulder brought her awake.

"Mm-hmm." Lynn Edwards gave in to the prodding of her lover, the esteemed Professor of English, Benjamin Tallmadge Effingham. Still sleepy, she roused enough to prop herself against the massive oak headboard of his king-size featherbed. He wrapped her hands around a warm mug of

He wrapped her hands around a warm mug of coffee. "Drink up. You have class in less than an hour."

"I've got your class in less than an hour."

"And you know how I appreciate the prompt, prepared student."

She drew him closer with a tug on his perfectly knotted tie and gave him her most inviting smile. "Almost as much as you appreciate the energetic, limber student."

"True enough," he said, tickling her ear with his mustache. "Enjoy your coffee." He slipped from her grasp to restore the knot to pristine condition.

"Be on time."

"And my manuscript?"

"On the table by the back door. We'll discuss it after class."

She pouted at his imperial tone, but he didn't give in, just chucked her chin as if she was a favorite niece. She knew how well he compartmentalized. More than once she'd actually envied his ability to keep his personal and creative lives separate from his professional life.

"Now up and out. I expect your full participation in today's discussion."

"Yes, sir!" She grinned. "Shall I keep you on topic?"

"As if you could."

His laugh held a brittle warning she understood. He'd donned his professor role and didn't want any sort of intimacy from her at the moment.

Lynn blew him a kiss he predictably ignored, then sipped at her coffee as he walked away. She loved that particular view. None of her peers would have wasted a second glance on the lean, mature form she'd been bedding since summer session. But from the first moment, she'd seen through the craggy, well-read outdoorsman who thrived on

dashing the pipe dreams of ignorant, wide-eyed freshmen. She'd liked the intriguing layers she found under the arrogant, self-absorbed air he sported in the lecture hall. And she'd recognized the grudging sincerity in his eyes when he promised to take her from obscurity to published success.

Setting the coffee aside, she rolled out of bed to stretch, hoping movement would boost her energy since the caffeine hadn't kicked in. Her professor didn't tolerate dozing during discussions.

He didn't tolerate much of anything substandard and for that she should thank him. For months, she'd endured his extensive criticism of her work and his savage comments meant to discourage. In the process, she'd built her own wall between professional and personal interests. And she'd learned from her written mistakes, improving and polishing with each round of detailed Effingham analysis. The manuscript by his back door was her most promising yet and she'd grown bold enough to submit it to an interested publisher—without his approval.

Running out of time, she drained the cup of coffee by the bed and padded to the bathroom, pleased to see the second cup he'd placed for her

near the sink. He could be so thoughtful. She turned on the shower and flipped through a camping magazine as she waited for the water to heat up.

Lynn's pride to see Benjamin's name in a byline quickly faded as she read on. The words were hers. He'd plagiarized an assigned piece she'd written about her childhood. A piece the revered professor had deemed unworthy during a class discussion.

She tried to embrace her fury, but the lack of energy dampened her typical fire. This required hard consideration of how and when to report the violation. Fortunately, he'd come to expect her to withdraw while she reviewed his comments on her work.

That would buy her some time.

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"Now, let's look at this next example," Professor Effingham said. He came around to pass out a new handout, then leaned back against his desk.

Sitting in the front row, Lynn couldn't miss the brutal scrutiny as his eyes met hers. She dropped her gaze to the handout and easily recognized the otherwise unidentified excerpt from her latest manuscript. Copies graced every desk as students prepared for Effingham's notorious 'Ritual of Demolition'. It took all her strength to maintain her composure as he urged her classmates to find faults and make inane suggestions.

"The redundancies are startling," Effingham agreed with some overeager student. "It's hardly a wonder the author's not published. I've never seen so many examples of unnecessary words. And the topic and regional dialect are inaccessible to the general population." He crossed his arms and ankles and arched a daring brow. "Don't you agree, Miss

Edwards?"

"Oh, of course," she replied, matching his much-too-calm tone. "Though one must wonder if the same was said of Faulkner."

The eyebrow climbed higher. "Your point?"

Lynn forced her lips into a brave smile. "A writer must be true to the flavor and element of the story or it'll never rise above scrap."

"You don't believe this piece could stand improvement?"

"Everything can be improved." She couldn't suppress the yawn in time.

"If we're boring you, feel free to excuse yourself." He sneered, "Try some coffee."

Lynn gathered her things. "You're too kind." She ignored the whispers and looks as she trudged up the stairs, feeling as if she were wading through hip-deep water. "If I may be allowed to comment?" she asked, one hand on the door.

He nodded consent.

"To paraphrase, I find your class 'hasn't anything anymore worth saving'."

Effingham laughed aloud. "To continue in Faulkner's voice, my dear," he lifted the papers, "this work is 'nothing worth being lost'."

The ever-growing exhaustion had nearly consumed her, but she held her ground to direct her next words to the class. "Thus concludes *The Sound and the Fury*; his favorite."

* * *

Lynn made it to her apartment, collapsing face down on the couch, one hand hooked limply through the strap of her book bag. With her final breath, she made a feeble cry to her roommate for help.

"Lynn! It's here!" Kim burst through the front door, waving a letter. "Lynn, wake up! You did it! They want to publish your book!" Kneeling by her friend, Kim caught the weak spark of awareness in Lynn's eyes as her heart stopped beating forever.

When the paramedics arrived, too late, there was no further explanation to be found.

2002

Lynn sat in Dr. Effingham's chair, her ethereal feet propped insolently on his desk as yet another class of doomed freshmen trickled into the beture hall. In the past twenty years of observation, she'd come to understand his impatience with the idealistic, foolish, and horribly untalented. Nevertheless, she stayed to protect the precious few with the rare gift he ruthlessly sought to destroy.

The professor emerged from his office, five minutes past the appointed start time. Lynn *tsked* a soft reproach, pleased by his immediate demand for absolute silence. She'd found a somewhat dark satisfaction in watching his fall from the pinnacle of respect.

He'd gained his fame by dancing on her grave. The very grave he'd put her in. In memoriam of his most promising student, Effingham vowed to see her work published. The publicity surrounding the acclaimed professor and the unique situation pushed the book to the top of the bestseller lists. Those

profits went to establishing a scholarship fund, but then he gained his own wealth and reputation by writing more bestsellers from the notes he'd stolen from her.

In time, she'd learned to let go of those little things she'd been denied. As a ghost she had no need of money, wealth, or accolades. Instead, she focused her energies on finding a way to erode both his security and peace of mind. For real justice is only the true repentance experienced in heart and soul of the offender.

So, Lynn set about infecting his dreams, impeding his relationships, and interrupting his classes. And here she remained, haunting his lectures with her full participation, haunting his best students with lofty inspiration, and haunting him with a vaporous touch he could never confess.

As he passed, she moved within and through him. Then she whispered in his ear, caressed his arms, and settled herself on his desk to watch the show. He meticulously adjusted shirt cuffs; first left, then right. Then he shifted the shoulder seams and a gave firm tug on the shirt at his waist. Swiped his mustache, patted his belt, rubbed his right ear, and then he cleared his throat and swiped under his

nose again. Hitched the pant legs, crossed his arms, uncrossed them, tapped his left leg twice, and finished with a pull at his collar with his right hand.

These fourteen distracting ticks, always cycling, were a detriment to his teaching, writing, and health. Lynn considered it fitting punishment to slowly drive him mad like this. Not unlike the way he had murdered her with slow, undetectable, noxious deliberation

Oh, he'd join her soon; she could see him worsening with each passing day. His body emaciated, his mind perched precariously on the edge of insanity, he spent sleepless nights desperately searching student's papers for creative material. He could no longer carry on a coherent conversation without drifting tangentially through unrelated topics. However, the best part, she laughed softly, was his inability to eliminate his redundancies.

Effingham trembled now as he sloshed coffee from his personal thermos into a mug. His paranoia had grown extreme over the years; he refused to drink coffee he didn't personally brew. And it still took both hands to get the drink to his lips for the first sip each day.

"Professor?"

Lynn studied the freshman standing before them. Regan Black was a promising young woman with a broad imagination and a gift for vivid description. Her last paper had even contained an enchanting paranormal element. Regan had great instincts with the written word and Lynn was making every effort to ensure Effingham wouldn't ruin her.

The professor was still struggling to pull her name from the clutter of his mind. Between the swipes at his mustache, he gave up. "What do you want?"

"You asked to speak with me."

"I don't request meetings with students." He adjusted his cuffs again.

Regan held out the first page of a manuscript she'd submitted on his request. In bold red pen a nearly illegible scrawl proved the student correct. Lynn moved her weightless form closer to the professor and giggled softly when he muttered about the draft.

Both heads turned to her. It wasn't the first time a student had shown an awareness of her. Effingham's frequent rants about the possessed hall

and years of Lynn's ghostly pranks were as legendary as his wickedly unpredictable grading.

"The meeting?" Regan persisted.

Effingham squinted at the paper before him. "Ah, yes. We'll need to collaborate to improve this."

"I respectfully disagree, professor."

"When you've lived long enough to have a dissenting opinion I'll let you know."

"But, sir, it's from the feminine perspective."

Uneasy with this exchange, Lynn blew a cold knife of air down the professor's back. He cycled through his ticks twice, rambling about a feminist literary journal he'd been editing for years. Suddenly remembering the lecture hall full of students, he snapped, "After class, Miss..." He crossed his arms, and then waved her away. "To your seat."

He circled his desk and launched into a monologue of Faulkner's ability to hold the reader captive. But he was soon off topic, discussing the unlimited opposing forces in the world and the necessity of a writer to express and exploit them to the benefit of the reader.

"Day and night." Cuffs, shoulders.

"Name another."

He pointed to a young man and then he went on to waist, mustache.

"Good and bad," he acknowledged the student's answer as he tapped his belt. "Wet and dry." Ear, throat. "Hot and cold." He continued to provide an example with each nervous movement.

Lynn's humor was short as she considered just how he'd butcher or steal Regan's work. "Life and death," she murmured in his ear before he rubbed it again.

"Life and death," Effingham repeated.

"Murder and suicide?" a student ventured.

"Hardly opposing, as both are permanent," the professor scoffed. "Let's move to poetic contradictions. Go."

"Poisonous beauty," Lynn caused a student to blurt out.

"Screaming silence," Regan contributed from the first row.

Sensing an opening, Lynn willed the air into an eerie shriek through the drafty paned glass of the windows. When Effingham stepped closer to check the lock, she iced it; letting the cold metal burn him. As he rubbed the blood back into his fingers, she

rustled papers on his desk, blowing an excerpt of hers that he hadn't used for twenty years into Regan's hands.

"Concise Faulkner."

Effingham whirled. "Who said that?"

"Lynn Edwards," Regan said, as Lynn whispered, "Me."

"Redundant as always," Effingham muttered.

"But you said Faulkner was brilliant, the greatest ever," a student dared to say.

"He still is," Effingham snapped.

One student turned to another. "How can he be both redundant and brilliant?"

"He wasn't! She is!" Effingham shouted. "Don't you see? Can't you see?" He waved wildly at Lynn's translucent form hovering at the lectern. Then he added another tic to the routine: He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Fifteen!" Lynn laughed out loud. The disembodied, merry sound bounced from wall to window to ceiling to floor. She rushed across the hall to face him.

"Admit it," she demanded so only he could hear. "Tell them of your lethal brilliance!" When he hesitated, she pushed a mild quake under the floor

bringing the lanky man to his knees.

"Never," he denied vehemently. "You barely understood theme!" He tapped his leg and pulled his collar as he struggled to gain his feet. "You never could have been...been anything."

"Nothing worth being lost that she can lose." Lynn's ghostly voice echoed through the hall this time.

"You've no right to quote Faulkner!" he hollered at the ceiling.

Baffled, the students watched as the fidgety professor went out of his mind. He argued intensely with someone they couldn't see, his glassy eyes tracking the air above them. One or two cameras flashed, but Regan alone felt compelled to take notes.

His first words were a violent spurt of confession, and then gave way to incoherent mutterings as an airy voice sounded a persistent, calm descant to Effingham's shrilling madness.

To the collective horror of the freshmen, Effingham then traded his normal cycle of movements for one final convulsion. His face turned red, purple, and finally the gray of death, as he strangled himself with his tie. The students fled

as one.

When the paramedics arrived, too late, the hall was empty save for scattered papers and the only explanation written in perfect penmanship on the chalkboard behind the lectern:

He hasn't anything anymore worth being saved for nothing worth being lost that she can lose.

-William Faulkner, The Sound and the Fury

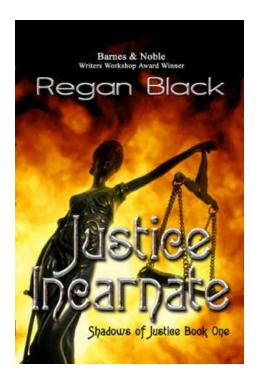
"Good luck with eternity," Lynn said when the professor momentarily joined her realm. As an inky darkness reared up to claim him, she turned and floated toward the library to bestow a wisp of inspiration on the most promising young writer she'd seen in twenty years.

Meet the Author:

Regan Black crafts her stories in the South Carolina Lowcountry where the rich history adds fire to her vivid imagination. Encouraged by her husband, children, retired greyhounds and numerous other pets, she savors the rare quiet moments when the words flow onto the page. A voracious reader, she's often found with a book in hand, or at least nearby, as she taxis children and dogs to their respective appointments. She's pleased to credit her friends and critique partners with her successful leap from her blissfully boring daily life into the action market.

You may visit Regan at www.reganblack.com

Coming February 2005 From Echelon Press



Whoever said, "You only live once," ...didn't know Jaden Michaels!

Justice Incarnate Excerpt

Time Stamp: 1068

I sank the dagger deep into his inconsistent blubber and seethed. For he laughed at me even as his blood pooled at my feet. Then his evil soul slipped free.

Alas, the deed was fruitless. I knew it before the cold sting of forged steel severed my head. The demon held the advantage.

My lifeless body lay twisted and foreign beneath me as my soul rose, already fashioning apology and plea. For failure served no one and meant only more pain. How would my mission be fulfilled?

Chicago 2096

Jaden Michaels splashed the last of her best merlot into the only clean glass in the kitchen. Presentation didn't matter when a woman only needed to rinse the taste of a poor lover from her

lips. Poor he'd been, but useful. He reported to another in the criminal food chain who could bring her closer to her target.

She swirled the wine in the glass and her mind flashed with timeless, bloody memories. Tossing back the last swallow, she imagined the day when she could rest. She prayed this life would break the cycle.

She stripped the sheets from the bed, unwilling to sleep amidst the smells of a sweaty bar fly. Cocooning herself into a clean blanket she closed her eyes, hoping her elusive quarry would behave himself tonight.

Then the crying began. The frightened, jittery tears of an innocent child pushed into a new world of horrors. Jaden tried to tune out the echoes of pain and terror that sounded in her mind each time he struck, but she knew anyway. And the residual grief she'd share with the victim come morning is what fueled her to keep slogging her way through the bottom dwellers, the middle men, the lieutenants and body guards until she could take the head off the beast–permanently.