



Magdalene
A Novel

LAMBDA LITERARY AWARD WINNING AUTHOR
MILENA MCKAY

MAGDALENE NOX

MILENA MCKAY

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Cover by Em Schreiber

PRAISE FOR THESE THIN LINES

Milena McKay is one of the best sapphic authors out there and with *These Thin Lines*, she's created a tale for the ages

— THE LESBIAN REVIEW

Milena McKay doesn't write the same book twice. She can write age gaps and ice queens in all of them (though there's no ice queen in this one) and there will be no confusion, all the characters have their own personality, their own way of speaking, of standing, of acting.

McKay's books are works of love, which translates into beautiful writing. In *These Thin Lines* in particular, the love the author has for Chiara Conti is palpable.

— JUDE SILBERFELD, WWW.JUDEINTHESTARS.COM

DISCLAIMER

ON LEARNING

Dear reader,

It's been two years since *The Headmistress* was published. Magdalene Nox brings a new perspective on the events both in and out of the original book. We have the backstory of the younger Magdalene, her relationship with characters we've never met before or met only in passing. And while the sanctity of the original book is preserved in this one, it is not done so to the absolute. I've listened to those of you who have reached out with advice and guidance and have removed certain terms (e.g. "clean" in reference to being healthy, "lunatic" etc.) that were in the original. Outside of that, the dialogue, sequence of events, scenes that we have seen have been respected. We are living them through Magdalene's eyes and with a new understanding of how time changes language, and how we as authors have the responsibility to our readers to acknowledge that and keep them safe.

Oh, and Em snuck a missing comma or two in there...

Thank you for the love you have for Magdalene, Sam, Willoughby and the Dragons' crew. I'm absolutely certain this is not their last hoorah yet.

With much love,

Milena McKay

To those who are our shelter amidst all storms...

Have enough courage to trust love one more time and always one more time.

— MAYA ANGELOU

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PROLOGUE

*T*hirty years ago...

SIX MONTHS HAD to be some kind of record even for her. Six months ago, she'd stepped onto this godforsaken island for the first time. And one day, she'd gotten in trouble for burning candles in her dorm room. She'd been told she'd be expelled if she caused trouble.

That's when she'd first run away from the ever-preaching Professor Dorsea and found herself on a slab of rock overlooking the tumultuous ocean. Amber Dragon Cliff welcomed what her mother would refer to as 'a brooding teen in the midst of a temper tantrum', embracing her and calming her heightened spirits.

And here she was half a year later, saying goodbye to the rocks and the waves, with Professor Dorsea quietly standing a few steps away from her, appearing to give her time and space, despite having no clue what was happening.

Good...

Nobody understood anyway. Not her, nor these waters, nor this cliff. They could burn for all she cared. And she didn't care at all.

A strange sensation of cold ran through her, and she touched her sternum. It felt like a wound was open there, skin and tendons, muscles and sinew frayed.

Dramatic much?

Even to her own mind, it sounded overblown, but no matter how much

she tried to take a deeper breath, it seemed impossible, the tearing in the middle of her chest burning and leaving her shivering.

A panic attack...

She recognized those easily enough. Immersed in gruesome images, she rubbed her palms over her cheeks, trying to avoid any further embarrassment. Tears of helpless rage stung her eyes, but she refused to let any more fall. These people deserved none of her emotions. She'd break apart later. When she got back to Boston. Her mother wouldn't care if she howled with pain, anyway. She'd buy her some useless bauble or send her away on some stupid trip to Europe to get her out of her sight.

Magdalene bit her lip, and the taste of copper on her tongue grounded her. She licked the crimson away, standing just a bit taller. Her fall had already been predetermined, so why not have all her pride on display?

Her eyes dry now, she wondered why there'd been tears in the first place. So they'd expelled her. Big deal. It was the fourth boarding school she'd been kicked out of. Nothing new. A shrug was all she could muster as a reaction.

She hated them all, so why did it hurt this much? Why did her heart feel like it would beat itself out of her ribcage? Right out of that damned open wound dead center of her chest?

Was it because all she really wanted was to stay? Another shake of her head. No, no, she didn't care. *She didn't care.* Not about Hilda, nor about this decrepit place, nor about the dark granite, or white marble and burnished oak of the manor. None of it mattered. It wasn't beautiful. It wasn't haunted by the veneer of peace that was always just out of her reach.

Hilda had thrown her under the bus quickly enough, too, as though their kisses and their love didn't matter. Clearly they didn't to her, since she hadn't spoken to Magdalene since they'd been caught making out. Since Hilda had told everyone, she was forced into that kiss to begin with.

Whatever...

And the way the school was headed, the marble would crumble from neglect sooner rather than later. Sure, they didn't see it just yet, but she had hidden in plenty of basements and attics, and all the signs were there. The adults were all either righteous zealots or mealymouthed appeasers. In between the two, the school was not well cared for, and even a teenager recognized that the consequences would soon rear their heads. So much for the fine masonry and centuries-old carpentry.

Perfect...

All of it should simply disappear. This entire island, this entire school. Nobody was happy on this pile of rocks and sand, anyway. Not the students, hiding inside the ancient closets, nor the hypocritical teachers, preaching against their own nature.

Her breath was coming in shallow exhalations, but at least the tears were now forgotten. She'd never let these people see her cry.

A quiet cough from behind startled her and made her angrier. Would a few more minutes have killed anyone?

"Ms. Smith?"

Yeah, it looked like a little extra time would definitely be too damn much to ask. As would giving her the privacy and dignity to say her goodbyes in peace.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, willing the voice behind her to get the hint. It didn't. And neither did its owner, as a shaking hand landed on her shoulder.

"Magdalene... It's getting late..."

She shrugged off the patronizing appendage.

"I heard you the first time." It pleased her that her voice was wrapped in steel. Even her mother would have been proud. If she'd be bothered to notice, that is.

"Well, then..." Professor Dorsea seemed to be lost for words. Magdalene was secretly very pleased indeed. *Suited her well*. Professor Dorsea hadn't had anything to say earlier either, when the trustees and the Board had decided to expel one Magdalene Smith from the school.

A gust of wind battered at the surrounding jasmine bushes, enveloping everything in their subtle sugary scent. Dammit, some things she would actually miss. As for the rest? Well, it *could* all burn. And if it didn't? She'd have to return, then... Just to make sure.

OF FAKE ORGASMS & REAL NEWS

*N*ow...

IT WASN'T the first time she'd had to fake an orgasm. It probably wouldn't be the last. But for some reason, this particular instance just made her sad and not a little irritable. Maybe because the entire evening felt like false advertisement.

First of all, the woman was sublime. And yet... The 'yet' did not occur to Magdalene until it was perhaps a touch too late. Mostly due to the aforementioned sublimeness.

The tall, sultry brunette had zeroed in on Magdalene the moment she'd walked in and pursued her relentlessly until they ended up on the luxurious king-size bed in the hotel room upstairs.

Well, technically, they'd ended up on the elevator first. Where Magdalene made her come and held a hand over those pouty lips to avoid getting arrested for public indecency. Though this was New York and perhaps they would get cheers instead? Possibly wagers?

In any case, Magdalene had plans and did not want them ruined by crowds. She wasn't into exhibitionism. She was very much a one-on-one type of person.

Hence, she took her time against the door of the massive suite, where she no longer bothered to keep her companion silent. In fact, she enjoyed the screams immensely. Was the woman overdoing it? Maybe a little. But the muscles squeezing Magdalene's fingers didn't lie. Either in the elevator, or

against a wall, or on the thick carpet that muffled most of the theatrical performance the woman indulged in.

However, it was when Magdalene finally allowed herself to be taken—on the silk sheets, thank you very much—that she realized this would be one of those times where her own acting skills would be put to the test.

She did what she could at first. Orgasms, on occasion, were work. And so she labored towards one with what little help she was getting from the mouth between her legs.

But it was to no avail.

Hence that very sad aforementioned ‘yet’. The woman was beautiful and passionate, charming and persistent. And yet...

Magdalene faked her climax with years of practice and resoundingly positive reviews, and for a while, only loud breathing could be heard.

As her chest rose and fell, her thoughts turned to the clothes strewn all over the expensive rug and along the path towards the exit door. Would it be terribly gauche to get up right away? She was supposed to still be in the afterglow of a monumental release... But did she really care when she would never see this woman again?

When the breathing to her left evened out and turned into a soft snore, Magdalene thought that the universe balanced itself. No orgasm. But no awkward conversation post-encounter either.

As she slipped out the door, her Louboutins dangling from her fingers, Magdalene didn’t look back at the sated figure she left behind.

“YOU’RE ON TIME...”

The brilliant, perhaps a bit too bright, smile of her ex-husband greeted her from the table the maitre d’ had led her to. Timothy said nothing, just jumped solicitously to his feet, shooed the distinguished man away, and pulled out her chair himself. His hand gently caressed the curve of her back as she lowered herself into the seat. Magdalene wanted to roll her eyes. So it was going to be that kind of breakfast.

“I missed you. I couldn’t wait to see you.”

This time, she did not restrain her impulse. His smile widened at her eye roll and before she knew it, he was waving over their server and doing what

he'd always done for the entirety of their marriage. He took over.

When he'd finished rattling off both their orders, Magdalene raised her eyes to the young woman diligently scrawling in her notebook and waited. Predictably—since this *was* a woman—once she'd completed her task, she met Magdalene's gaze.

"I'll have a double espresso now and as for the rest, I'll have Eggs Benedict."

"Yes, ma'am," and "Magdalene!" sounded simultaneously, and the server departed with a slight smirk. When she turned back to Timothy, Magdalene was faced with a petulant pout she wasn't as well-acquainted with as the once-beloved expressive aquamarine eyes. Again she wondered when life had shredded the two of them into tiny, unrecognizable pieces, leaving a feature here and there, perhaps to confuse them both with familiarity when they no longer knew each other.

The face she'd once said 'I do' to, slowly turned neutral, although both excitement and petulance still chased each other in those mercurial depths. Was this why she'd never felt quite sure of her footing with him when they'd been married? The lack of steadiness, for want of a better word?

They both shook their heads, as if clearing the cobwebs of their own thoughts, and this time, when they smiled at each other, it was sincere.

"I am an ass?" His voice was quiet, sprinkled with enough contrition to mask the mischief, but Magdalene saw he wasn't sorry. And she also knew him well enough to predict that he would always try to order for her, no matter how many breakfasts they had together.

"You are. But thanks to the institution of no-fault divorce, you are no longer an ass I have to concern myself with, dear." She said the words in the most mellow tone possible, both to mollify and to finally move the conversation forward. Their meetings were getting tiresome in their lamentations of the past.

"Magdalene—"

"What is left to say that we have not discussed?" She could hear the tiredness in her own voice, and he knew her better than many, many others in her life. Enough to have sensed this in a way she no longer appreciated, because he reached out that perfectly groomed hand, the three-carat cufflinks—a family heirloom—catching the sunlight in the nearly empty restaurant. She allowed the touch, but only for a moment, drawing a tiny bit of strength from the familiar warmth before shaking it off.

His eyes followed her retreating fingers.

“When I think of how I lost you, Magdalene, how I threw away the best thing that has ever happened to me in my entire, wretched life, everything burns inside of me—”

Magdalene did not bother to suppress her groan.

“Timothy, it’s acid reflux. I’ve told you time and again to get checked for GERD—”

She was expecting more sulkiness because her dry sense of humor didn’t always land with him, but instead, he threw his blond mane back, and his laughter, melodic and charming, filled the restaurant.

“I deserved that one, dearest, for being a jerk twice.” They smiled at each other again, threads of once-sincere affection tangled with pain and betrayal they chose to bury for another time. Or forever, if it were up to Magdalene. She could not be any more finished with him if she were a widow.

He seemed to sense the direction of her thoughts, and after their plates were placed in front of them, he finally reached into the inside pocket of his suit jacket and offered her an envelope. She took it, more on instinct, trusting him enough to not hand her a proverbial snake.

Perhaps she should have reconsidered her faith in him. Because even though the paper was folded, the crest at the top of the header bled black ink that seemed to seep into her skin. She knew this seal.

Timothy slowly chewed on his steak and eggs, seemingly oblivious to the fact that Magdalene hadn’t unfolded the document he’d so cavalierly placed in her hand.

“Apologies and divorce aside, I’m aware you would prefer to have seen the last of me, but it turns out I’m back in your life, dearest.” He took a small, careful, and somehow genteel sip from his glass of water, and now his eyes shone with a shrewdness she very much recognized. The nonchalance from earlier had vanished entirely. This was business. For all his faults, Timothy Bowbridge Rodante Nox was an excellent and dedicated entrepreneur.

With the paper scorching her fingertips, her breath grew shallow, a feeling not unlike donning a chainmail shirt constricting her chest. She couldn’t speak. Couldn’t move. Couldn’t begin to guess what was to come. But Magdalene did know her thirty years of waiting were up. The black, bleeding ink of the crest told her as much.

At her raised eyebrow, his smile turned into a full-on grin, but he didn’t make her wait any longer. “Joel Tullinger of The Three Dragons Academy

for Girls has graciously, and dare I say desperately, extended an invitation for me to become a trustee on the board of the esteemed institution he is heading. I have not yet accepted. However, I have communicated my verbal acknowledgment of the honor being bestowed...”

Unable to hold his gaze, she glanced down at herself. The wound in the center of her chest, that same thirty-year-old injury with its frayed veins and nerves and tendons, gaped open today just like it had all those years ago.

The Three Dragons Academy for Girls... Six words. *Dragons*. One word, really. One word, yet it consumed everything, the whole world and apparently her sanity, since her Oxford blouse was impeccable and the bralette underneath continued to encase her breasts in lace and satin. There was no wound.

There was no wound.

He gave her a long, thoughtful look, as though discomfited by her silence, before proceeding tentatively.

“This is something you’ve always wanted...”

She laid her fork down with a precise movement, slow and careful, as if she was holding a grenade—one that would explode at any moment and cover her in the essence of those long-forgotten dreams. Were they forgotten? Had she not shoved them down deep enough and made them sufficiently small to fit into the darkest corner of her heart? Hadn’t she done all that? Oh, but who was she lying to now?

“I have wanted things all my life, Timothy. Wanting things is something I excel at. We both know that. It’s the so-called ‘things’ that never seem to want me back, or not in the way I’d like, that is the real problem.”

She hadn’t intended to take another shot at him. After all, he had wanted her, and maybe even in ways that she had wanted him, too, but they’d failed anyway. Yet he was looking at her steadily, either choosing to dismiss the jab, or not taking this particular one personally.

“Well, this time, it’s different. Tullinger and his cronies don’t actually want me, Magdalene. You must understand that. Sure, a name like mine looks great on their current roster, and Rodante is doing amazingly well, even with you no longer there. But despite the prestigious name, dearest, they aren’t after this particular Nox. They want you. I’m their lure, so to speak.”

She narrowed her eyes. That something feral that had coiled in her ribcage earlier, like an animal ready to wake up after years of hibernation, reared its head fully now. And Magdalene felt the tear of its claws. The

Dragon, its eyes blazing, was still very much alive. And with it, that very emotion she had been squashing ever since she was a sixteen-year-old kid, banished for nothing more than being who she was, awakened. *Hope*. On the heels of that wretched, saccharine bit of fanciful foolishness roared the fire. *Revenge*.

“You are saying...” She let the sentence dangle, words dripping with acid.

“I am saying that several of the trustees are in town. And they would like to meet with you tomorrow. A cocktail party of sorts, as a preview to the more formal interview.”

She wanted to laugh. The games these worthless men played.

“Formal interview? I am courted by four different private schools, half of them richer and the other half bigger than Dragons has ever been. And given the state of that school, an interview—”

“Is an insult.” He calmly finished for her, polishing off his coffee. “They’re well aware, dearest. Hence, I believe, they want me on the board. To persuade you, and to ensure that all these so-called official procedures are just that—formalities.” He winked at her before taking a sip of his water this time, his throat working in the confines of the pristine white, starched collar.

“However,” and this time the earlier mischief returned to his features, “you knowing the precise state The Three Dragons are in now—and I bet you’ve been keeping abreast of their budget and spending projections to the cent for years—surely gives you a leg up, dearest? After all, this is your school—”

“It’s nothing of mine, Timothy!” The slight raise in her own voice surprised her. As did her full plate, when she finally lowered her eyes from Timothy’s too damn perceptive ones. He’d finished his meal. She hadn’t even touched hers, her fingertips now clutching a crumpled piece of paper with the crest leaving a brand on her skin.

“I don’t have to say yes, and we don’t have to join these people for cocktails tonight, dearest. I am going to preside over the merger of Bowbridge Industries and that large consortium my father has been courting for the past year, and I’ll really have to stretch myself to take on more responsibilities of any kind. I realize you’re flying to California next week and at least two schools there are making you very attractive offers. We can forget this entire conversation ever happened. It’s already a blur in my mind. The Three Dragons? Whatever does it even mean?”

Her ex-husband, as perceptive and as troublesome as he was, was also, at times, unexpectedly kind. And this was one of those moments. He knew parts of her history with the school, aspects of what it meant to her, and he was giving her an out. One that would allow her to save face, her dignity, and perhaps her sanity. What was she even doing considering Dragons? It had been exactly thirty years.

Magdalene set down the crumpled paper. Timothy took it and carefully folded it back into his pocket.

With the reminder gone from her sight, she felt like she could breathe with her full chest again. Timothy was right. They were busy people, after all. She could snub Joel Tullinger and get on with her life. And California had everything one could dream of. Politics, weather, and no vestiges of her pathetic childhood dreams of revenge... Or hope...

But the wound in her chest pulsed, a gaping hole that she had nursed or hidden and been ashamed of her entire life. And Magdalene Nox was many things, but above all, she was no coward.

“I could use a good cocktail or two though... And we might as well listen to these useless people, since they’ll be paying for the drinks.” Her voice was sly even to her own ears.

His smile was triumphant, and she felt herself reciprocating it. It wasn’t a gentle or affectionate gesture, however. Instead, it was filled with rancor and retribution, and not a small amount of schadenfreude. Timothy, perceptive as always, had only one thing to say. And it resonated deeply, sending all those veins and nerves and tendons inside her singing.

“‘Magdalene Nox, Headmistress of Three Dragons,’ does have a ring to it, dearest.”

The Dragon at her breast roared, deafening her for a second, her ears ringing and her mouth parted. But then Magdalene raised her eyes upwards, where Manhattan’s early spring rain washed the skylights, quieting down the beast. It wasn’t time for fire just yet.

Not. Just. Yet...

OF OLD WOUNDS & NEW TITLES

Magdalene tsked at her own lack of focus and re-crossed her legs. The bar stool wasn't ideal for fitted skirts, and it was perhaps the whisper of the thigh-highs' lace peeking out from under the tiny slit on the side of the garment that was causing so many stares to be directed her way.

Granted, she didn't need tight-fitting clothes or stockings to be admired. She had grown used to it over the years. If she had to thank her mother for one thing, it may well be for this. Candace Whatever-Her-Current-Hyphenated-Name-Was regarded the glances, thirsty looks and glares as a given.

"They will stare anyway, my girl. So let them."

Present-day Magdalene nodded at the ogling bartender as he slid a glass of water her way with a quick smile.

Teenage Magdalene had nodded more for show, then done what she normally did where her mother was involved. She'd allowed herself to be swept up in whatever affection Candace had time for in between husbands. When a new man appeared on the horizon, Magdalene was immediately shipped off to a boarding school and kept there until the next divorce. Which inevitably occurred within regular intervals.

Outside, the New York evening was generously pouring tepid rain on the hurrying patrons who were making their way into the bar, shaking out their umbrellas and letting their hair down after a long day of doing whatever well-to-do New Yorkers did.

Magdalene looked down at her drink and closed her eyes. There was no escaping the memories tonight, it seemed. A year was just about all the time Candace spared her spouses before dropping them like the previous day's

news they were to her and pulling her only daughter from wherever she'd shoved her off to in the first place. Lather, rinse, repeat.

After a while, Magdalene had simply quit keeping up with her mother's frequent name changes, weddings, and subsequent divorces. There had been three or four husbands by the time she turned sixteen and half a dozen since. More? Less? And why was she thinking about her mother to begin with?

She shook her head and reached for her wine. The Cabernet was not a safe choice anywhere these days, but this establishment had risen to the occasion. No wonder the esteemed and deep-pocketed trustees of the Three Dragons Academy for Girls had chosen it. A two-story dining room, with the bar on the second floor overlooking the expanse of the restaurant below, it suited Magdalene's plan to a T.

She'd arrived early on purpose and was escorted upstairs, and now observed the goings-on from her perch, sipping good wine while allowing the wealthy, exclusive patrons to ogle her. She didn't mind. Their eyes held no weight, no palpable energy of any kind. They washed off her the way the brine of the ocean washed off her cliff.

Magdalene wrinkled her nose at the romantic notion of some piece of rock on a speck of land being "hers," but suddenly something made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up, and that sensation, the one she knew so well, the one that made her mouth go dry and her fingers tremble, the one that meant she was being watched, intruded with the force of a freight train.

She took a deep breath before allowing herself to take a careful look around from under her lashes, giving nothing away. Then Magdalene saw her... A gorgeous, sultry brunette sat at the other end of the room, very obviously demanding her attention.

Long legs and fire embers in dark eyes. Late thirties to mid-forties. Short, cinnamon-brown bob, framing a beautiful face. As Magdalene slowly perused her features, the woman very deliberately and purposefully uncrossed her legs, giving Magdalene a glimpse of what went on below the tight-fitting red dress.

She just lifted an eyebrow when the legs crossed again, after she'd been left with the very clear idea that there was, in fact, nothing underneath. Nothing at all.

The smoky undertones of the wine filled her mouth with something akin to desire, despite the artifice of the woman's movements, the practiced seductive gesture... What did it matter? They were both playing a game, and

the rules were such as to not mind the act.

Magdalene raised her glass in the direction of the dark corner where the fire banked in the depths of the woman's eyes, and if the wink sent her way was anything to go by, she'd have a nice evening once the business at hand was done. Hopefully, she wouldn't have to fake anything this time—

“I like her.”

As it turned out, she would have to fake something after all. A smile, aimed at her ex-husband who unceremoniously sat down next to her, buzzing her cheek in one smooth move while keeping his gaze on the brunette whose eyes narrowed before she turned away completely.

Magdalene allowed herself a small scowl. Timothy didn't quite crow, but judging by the way he was grinning triumphantly, it was a close call.

“Did I interrupt?” His tone as innocent as a cherub's, he gently turned her wrist. The Vacheron Constantin watch gleamed at him, all steel and platinum, as she pulled her hand away.

“You could have just asked me for the time.” She chose to ignore his earlier line of questioning entirely.

“Yes, but then I would have missed seeing the watch. I miss it almost as much as I do you. In fact, if this wasn't a gift from your mother, I would have tried to snatch it from you in the divorce. And to think that you don't even like it. It's a work of art.”

Magdalene tuned him out. The Vacheron weighed heavily on her wrist, along with all the memories, and if she were in a mood to lie to herself, she'd say she didn't know why she even wore it. Years later, and it only grew heavier, and yet she never once chose to wear one of the myriad of watches he'd gifted her during their marriage. Or any of the timepieces she'd bought for herself once the marriage was over.

Timothy was right about her not liking the watch. She never had. Not thirty years ago, when her mother had given it to her as a consolation prize for being discarded, and not now, when all it did was remind her of exactly why she'd received it in the first place. As shackles went, this was an expensive and rare one.

“And speaking of your mother. I had lunch with Candace last week, before I came down. Honestly, the watch and your mother. I wish I could have gotten both of them in the divorce.”

His smile was sincere, no pretense clouded his eyes, and Magdalene saw the boy she'd fallen for all those years ago. The one who'd made her smile—

who made her shake her head these days. At herself, at him, at them, and at how they had broken each other into tiny sharp shards.

The bartender handed her another glass of wine—one she hadn't ordered—and pulled her back into the present and to the no-longer-clear eyes of her ex-husband, who was now watching her with something akin to poorly masked jealousy.

“The lady in red left you a note and wished to order a glass of wine for you, ma'am.”

Magdalene did not even have to feign surprise as she reached for the offering. She'd been certain the woman had lost interest with Timothy's arrival.

The napkin was neatly folded under the glass, and Magdalene could see the numbers in inelegant swirls, stark, girlish pink on pristine ivory. And for some reason, the chicken scratch, the garish color that had no place among the blacks and reds of their environment, along with the presumption of someone ordering for her—again, since it was two for two in as many days—just made her angry.

So when the woman walked by, quite pointedly in the direction of the ladies' room, Magdalene neither raised her head to meet the undoubtedly avid eyes, nor followed.

She took a second to delve into her own anger, into this restlessness that was absolutely uncharacteristic for her. Magdalene knew what was expected of her, the rules of the game very well-established: She projected confidence with a touch of arrogance, and women assumed she would follow them into hotel rooms and, in this particular case, a bathroom, push them against doors or walls, or stalls, and fuck them deaf and blind.

On the rare occasion that she obliged, she enjoyed it tremendously. As she glanced after the departing figure, alluring hips swaying farther and farther away from her, she bit her lip and decided she was being too maudlin for her own good. She had to snap out of it. No, she didn't do this type of thing often. Her life simply didn't allow for it, but she enjoyed it when she permitted herself the luxury. Tonight, now, was no time for an existential crisis.

When she turned back, Timothy smirked before throwing back his bourbon.

“I have no idea how you do it. And she was your type, too.”

“We have a meeting, Timothy.” Dripping acid from her tongue, angry

and discomfited by his flippant attitude and the memories of times long past, she pushed the two glasses away from herself. “And both of us need a clear head for this one.”

He tugged on his tie, and for a moment she thought he would loosen it just to spite her. Instead, he straightened it and gave her a long look.

“You can’t be seriously nervous about this. These men are mad about you. I made inquiries. The school is circling the drain and they are quite desperate.”

Magdalene sighed. Generally, this was true of any institution courting her. They were *all* circling the drain. They were all desperate. Dragons being both should make her ecstatic. After all, the only thing that would make her happier was if the damn place went up in smoke.

And yet...

What was it with her being this melancholy all of a sudden? She wanted to shake herself. She wasn’t exactly a happy-go-lucky type of person—*steady* was more how she would describe herself—but she wasn’t prone to bouts of this kind of insipid introspection and melodrama either.

Raised voices from below, a large party being seated in the most prominent place in the dining room, thankfully distracted her from the direction of her thoughts. Next to her, Timothy sat up straighter, and together they watched for a few minutes as the expensively dressed men were handed their menus and chatted while the servers poured wine and spirits.

“Tullinger, Ohno, Roswell Jr. He’s the one who’s resigning, so no clue why he’s even here. I guess as a courtesy to both of us?”

Timothy continued to list the names carefully, inclining his head, and Magdalene followed along until the entire table stood up for a late arrival. An elderly man took his seat, dismissively waving his bony hand at them.

“Stanton Alden—”

“I’m familiar.”

If she’d allow herself to be fanciful yet again, she’d look down her torso and observe that gaping wound in the middle of her chest. The one she’d pretended to not walk around with for the past thirty years, as it pulsed around the torn tendons and ichor, veins pumping blood to and from the stuttering, beating heart. A wound the size of a man’s palm. This very man’s palm.

Magdalene twisted the too-large watch band around her wrist and looked away. Yes, she was entirely too familiar. She knew the color of those gray

eyes, the flecks of darker shades that would catch the sunlight when he was scandalized, the long, elegant fingers that curled into fists as he tried to lower his voice when angered, the perfectly coiffed, then blond fringe he tended to flick out of his eyes when pacing and unsettled. And the feeling of his hand on her sternum, pushing her away from Hilda.

Magdalene closed her eyes. She knew him at his worst. Sure, she could look at him now—at his very best—calm, collected, cheerful even, surrounded by his peers, who clearly deferred to him, either as the oldest among them, or, as the former Governor of Massachusetts, the most revered.

She made herself look. Forced herself to observe how he presided over the table, despite the younger and obviously eager Tullinger lapping at his coattails and trying to steer the trustees' attention towards himself.

“That dynamic there...” Timothy motioned with his chin.

“Tullinger simping, you mean?”

“Dog eat dog, yes. And trust you to pinpoint it in a second.” Timothy gestured for another refill and turned away from the group.

“It’s the old dog versus the young-dog-who-wants-his-place dynamic. Alden is very much the alpha, but Tullinger, for all his ass-kissing, is just waiting to stand on his desecrated corpse and howl, his rival’s bloody throat ripped and staining his own muzzle.”

“God, Magdalene, your metaphors, honestly...” He shook his head as he clutched his heart, his laugh rueful.

“You’re the one who brought dogs into this conversation.”

Timothy shuddered, “I had no clue you’d go full Edgar Allan Poe on me.”

She flicked her fingers at him in a dismissive wave before focusing on the men dining beneath her again. It was a good vantage point. It filled her with a sense of superiority. Not that her ego wouldn’t have provided that, anyway. But it was good to not feel small anymore, especially in front of those gray eyes which had uncovered the one secret her sixteen-year-old self had wanted to keep from everyone.

For a moment, Magdalene wondered how well the Dragons’ Board of Trustees had done their research, and whether Stanton Alden knew who’d be joining them for cocktails in ten minutes.

HER CURIOSITY WAS SOON SATISFIED when Timothy escorted her towards the now cleared-off table under the watchful eyes of the nine men. Old, young, middle-aged, they seemed to have precious few things in common. Except two: They were rich men, and they all wanted her to take the job.

That much became clear when every single one of them stood up like toy soldiers the moment she and Timothy approached the table. It could have been comical, but the bows and hand kisses, and the general air of beseeching her, reeked of desperation and yet confusingly of something entirely opposite of that. She tried to focus on her own freshly applied jasmine perfume, but even the ever-familiar and comforting scent couldn't cut through the stench.

As Alden bowed his now graying mane over her hand—one of the few to press his dry lips to her knuckles—it suddenly occurred to Magdalene that he was keenly aware of her identity. And that—as the watery gray eyes indicated by moving past her after a second of close assessment—he didn't care.

Indifference.

What a strange and dangerous cocktail this was. They were desperate for her to helm Dragons, yet his nonchalance made it obvious they cared little about the school.

Interesting...

The conversation over pretentious drinks went as Timothy had predicted it would.

"...the school needs a strong hand. Fenway allowed the place to fall to shambles." Tullinger chugged some fruity concoction as if it contained no liquor whatsoever. Magdalene had heard alcoholism ran in the family and that Tullinger Senior had passed away a year or two ago from cirrhosis of the liver.

"Well, if anyone knows how to steer an institution away from the brink, it would be Magdalene." Timothy gave her hand a patronizing little pat, and she almost slapped him. The men around the table laughed, nodding at each other and exchanging knowing glances.

"Either save it, or throw it clear off that very brink, Ms. Nox. I am so tired of dealing with the old heap of rocks." Rolffe, old enough to know better and plainly sexist enough to not give a damn, refused to address her by her title, which tempted her to throw a drink at him even more so than his earlier comment about the school being a nuisance to him had.

"I know of your method, Doctor Nox. I understand that your talent is in

bringing these schools, these lost causes, up to snuff, so to speak. I am not sure there is enough at Dragons to be straightened out, though.” Alden’s lips attempted a smile that did not quite come out right. Magdalene wondered at his choice of words. “There is some good left there, to be certain, there are a few stellar teachers. I’d like to see them settled no matter the outcome of this entire venture, Doctor Nox. Beyond that, we might as well put a match to the place. Cheaper than maintaining it—open or closed.”

In the lull of general conversation, Stanton Alden’s words sounded raspy, almost too quiet to infer the deeper meaning behind them. What little humane concern he had for some of the souls stranded on that godforsaken island, he himself was obviously finished with it.

Magdalene said nothing, her eyes narrowing as the two of them stared at each other while the conversation picked up around them. She had hated him for thirty years, had carried the insult and humiliation she’d experienced at his hand like an imprint on her skin.

And here he was, saying the exact words she had been longing to hear—the demise of the school all but sanctioned by its Board of Trustees. But instead of rejoicing, she felt sick, bile coating her throat until she thought she’d need to excuse herself, unable to hold on to the nausea for much longer.

Anger.

That was the overwhelming emotion, she belatedly realized. The poison choking her. Venom, ready to spill out. She was furious. How foolish, really. How absolutely absurd.

Was it because she was just contrary enough to despise him more than she hated the school? And by extension oppose anything and everything he personally stood for, even if it meant keeping that damned piece of rock and stone safe and sound and prosperous, just to spite this man?

Magdalene couldn’t quite reconcile her own years-long goal with what she was feeling right now. The disgust at the dismissiveness and callousness of these people, of this one man. Where was all this anger coming from? After all, he wasn’t the only one who’d sealed her fate all those years ago. Tullinger Senior, the rest of the Board, and the faculty had done their part—perhaps played an even bigger role than Alden ever had.

“This job will probably be one of the easiest ones you’ve ever had, Ms. Nox. After all, just shut it all down. We have few expectations.” Tullinger snapped his fingers at the server, and Magdalene noticed the cringe Timothy

didn't even bother to hide. Well, she'd trained him for years, and he knew better than to treat people like garbage. Tullinger's behavior was one way of making sure the fresh-faced, polite girl would spit into whatever pretentious concoction he was ordering.

But it was time to intervene in what had become some sort of celebration of the death knell to the school by these people who were charged with safekeeping the institution, yet seemed hellbent on celebrating its rot instead.

"I never give up on things unless they are beyond hope, Mr. Tullinger." Timothy's ensuing self-deprecating smirk didn't deter her. "You will send the financial, academic, and other pertinent school records for the past ten years to my assistant, George Leroy. I will ascertain the depth of the issue, and we will proceed from there."

"Surely—" Tullinger leaned forward, his voice going slightly shrill, but Magdalene was having none of it. She had been listening to the noise these men had been producing—since one couldn't really refer to it as cogent thought—for over an hour, and she'd only managed to learn that they were contemptible, both collectively and as individuals, as trustees and people.

"I'm not finished, Mr. Tullinger. Once I avail myself of the opportunity to study the documents I requested, and provided I find things to be to my satisfaction, we will have a follow-up meeting where I will present the conditions required for me to accept the position."

For a moment, one could have heard a pin drop. It was obvious none of these men had expected her to not jump at the chance right away or to make any demands for that matter. She held Alden's gaze. After several long seconds, he narrowed his eyes before shifting them to his drink.

"And what might some of those conditions be, Doctor Nox?"

Sneaky old fox. She waited for him to look at her again before she answered, and she could tell the silence was making absolutely everyone around the table uncomfortable, except Alden. After all, one couldn't run for Governor of Massachusetts and win—and by all accounts serve as a decent public servant—without having some sort of negotiation acumen. Nonetheless, despite the heaviness of the moment, he lifted his eyes to her quicker than she would have.

Good.

"Before we discuss my stipulations any further, Mr. Alden, I need to fully familiarize myself with the real state-of-affairs at the school—"

"You aren't calling us liars now, are you, lass?" Rolffe, the patronizing

clown, had citrus seeds in his beard from his cocktail, and Magdalene found it perversely satisfying to see his sloppiness coupled with his asinine behavior.

“Mr. Rolffe, I have twenty years of experience in running private schools. What will happen to The Three Dragons Academy will depend on what I find in my research of its records. No more, no less. If the school cannot be saved, then I will close it. However, if there is hope for its salvation, then so be it.”

Her own words sounded like gunshots in her mind. One after another, bullets piercing the decades-long promise of ruin. *What was she saying? Why was she saying this?* It was clear they were hoping she would close the school. If Alden was to be believed, he’d be happy if she drove it off the Amber Cliff. So why was she even floating the possibility of her own involvement in anything other than the total destruction of Dragons?

“So your proviso is to be allowed to be in charge?”

Alden’s voice was even more hoarse now, and it did not escape Magdalene that it strained under the exceedingly precise formulation of his question.

“I would rather not list all of my requirements, Mr. Alden. That would be up to my lawyers, who will present you with the offer once all of my requests have been satisfied.” She saw displeasure darken his eyes. He was clearly not accustomed to being denied answers, and so she relented. Even if her answer was in the form of a dagger she knew he half anticipated, yet dreaded nonetheless.

Well, they did want Magdalene Nox for the job. What did they expect?

“But since you are asking, here are the Cliff’s Notes.” She laid her hands on the table, palms down, her crimson fingernails bleeding red streaks on the white tablecloth. Everyone followed her gesture but Alden, who held her gaze yet again.

“Should I accept the position, I will demand full control. Firing and hiring abilities, subject to me. Contractual and other executive prerogatives, among others. No interference from the trustees unless it is on major charter changes. And ultimately, I would demand a full twelve months of this arrangement without even so much as a phone call questioning anything I deem necessary at The Three Dragons Academy.”

The men, as if mesmerized, kept staring at her hands, fingers splayed on the table, and Alden’s eyes grew larger with each word trickling from her mouth like drops of venom.

She rose, and Timothy shook himself out of the collective trance and helped her pull out her chair.

“And those were just off the top of my head, gentlemen. My attorneys will be awaiting the paperwork I mentioned earlier. Have a good evening.”

She exited the restaurant without looking back.

MANHATTAN GREETED her with a surprising post-evening-rain freshness, and despite her four-inch heels, she didn't raise her hand for a cab. It was four blocks to her hotel. She'd walk and get a much needed breath of fresh air, and maybe she'd find her sanity along the way, since she had surely lost her mind in that restaurant.

“Suddenly you think you can save the damn school?”

Her stride didn't falter as she directed a razor sharp glare his way, and Timothy fell into step with her, their motions synchronized by years of practice during their long hikes and endless walks. She remembered how much he hated the outdoors, and yet he would join her regularly without so much as a complaint. She looked down at his shining Oxfords.

“Your shoes are much less comfortable, and yet you've decided to enjoy the delights of the garbage and marinara scents the neighborhood has to offer.”

“Please, it's 5th Avenue.”

“Well, garbage, marinara, and Dior then.”

She scoffed at him, even as a stray cat jumped onto the sidewalk right in front of them. Magdalene recoiled and sidestepped the mangy creature with great care while Timothy, surely to piss her off, crouched and gave the animal an ear scratch, probably catching seven different incurable diseases in the process.

“Do not dare touch me with those hands!” She blew her bangs out of her face and walked faster, the pedestrians parting like the Red Sea in front of her.

Her heel caught in a crack on the sidewalk, the shoe slipping off her foot. On pure instinct of having had him near for years, she reached out, but Timothy wasn't there to hold on to.

Magdalene, by some miracle, managed to catch herself on thin air,

stopping in time to stand tall, and put the shoe back on. Timothy, having abandoned the cat, was a few steps behind her, handing some woman into a cab. It only made her angrier. Not the shoe so much as the fact that she'd still reached for him—and he'd still not been there.

She sighed as Timothy's laughter sounded closer. He waited for her to pick up speed after her slip-up and fell in step yet again as he shoved his hands in his pockets.

"Your aversion to cats is one of the least explainable things about you. You basically *are* a cat. Same demeanor—"

She did not spare him a glance. "Timothy, I'm not in the mood to be insulted on my walk. It's a nice evening. If you want to keep up your little jokes, maybe take a cab?"

"Okay, okay, I'm just saying. That is a perfectly nice cat. There is no doubt she enjoyed being scratched." At her low growl, he chuckled and finally dropped the ridiculous subject. "What has gotten into you, though? I thought the meeting went exceptionally well. It's always a great show when you filet a group of very distinguished and very inept men. It's one of my favorite sights to behold. Magdalene destroying men. I should've had a painting commissioned. All red and silver oils."

Magdalene allowed him to speak, choosing to keep her pace rather than interrupting his apparently well-rehearsed monologue.

"They loved you in the way a masochist loves a whip, dearest. You were a hit. They want you and are scared shitless of you at the same time. So what is going on? You are the new Headmistress of The Three Dragons."

Her stride faltered just a second and, not wanting to risk another slip, Magdalene stopped. Next to her, Timothy mirrored her actions.

"I have not said yes."

She knew he was right. They would send her boxes and boxes of files, followed by a substantial contract, and even submit to most of her demands. She would make some ridiculous ones just to drop them again at the last moment. It would allow them to pretend to save face and that they'd actually had a chance to "negotiate" with her.

So why was she this edgy, this uncomfortable and disquieted? Nervous energy coursed through her, and she felt like a puppet, strings being pulled by an invisible hand.

The wound in her chest clenched, or maybe it was just her heart. Nerves and discomfort and everything else be damned... The Headmistress.

No, she hadn't said yes. But as Timothy gave her one last long look before falling behind and out of sight, they both knew it was only a formality.

The new Headmistress of Three Dragons Academy for Girls clicked her way down 5th Avenue on her favorite pair of Louboutins, turning heads left and right.

OF SERENDIPITOUS POETRY & MOMENTOUS DISCOVERIES

*I*t had hit her like a ton of bricks.

A familiar yet elusive feeling when her eyes met the intense gaze of the gray ones across the bar. Like banking coals, there'd been a certain fire in the darkened depths that took Magdalene by surprise. Along with that feeling... One she couldn't name, even if its appellation was right on the tip of her tongue.

Unnamed, the sensation had settled all around her, like fog, like a blanket, one of calm and warmth, despite the noisy and heavily air-conditioned bar.

No, Magdalene couldn't pinpoint the emotion the stare was eliciting in her, but she knew exactly why the eyes had stood out.

SHE'D BEEN PREOCCUPIED and slightly annoyed with herself for promising to attend the pedagogical conference held by the Association of East Coast Private School Teachers only to have her speaking engagement continuously postponed, largely due to the level of disorganization and general lack of professionalism of the event organizers.

Magdalene had half a mind to quit the entire thing altogether. After all, the way they were treating her was unseemly. But she had busied herself with studying the multitude of files sent over by The Three Dragons' trustees. The printouts and spreadsheets prepared for her by the ever-efficient George filled her hotel room, and after two days of poring over them, she could have sworn she smelled printer ink just about everywhere she went. The results of her

deep dive were sobering, if not to say utterly terrifying for the school.

A break had been in order, and tired as she was, Magdalene decided on the less than auspicious bar she now found herself in as her refuge. Despite her deliberate choice of a hotel a few blocks away from the one where the conference was being held—and hence where the majority of attendees were staying—Magdalene immediately realized she'd picked the wrong place regardless.

She regretted her decision the moment she crossed the worn-out threshold and twenty pairs of eyes turned to her with avarice. Men and women in various states of drunkenness openly ogled her.

Magdalene tried to shake the feeling of being undressed by all those eyes with every step she took. She must be really tired, since it had been over twenty years since anyone's attention had bothered her or even managed to get to her in any way, shape, or form, and yet she felt assaulted by it.

She perched on the barstool in the farthest corner, away from the other patrons, and motioned for the bartender. They instantly complied with her silent demand and placed the liquor menu in her outstretched hand. Wine was absolutely not an option, short of her grabbing an entire bottle and going back to her hotel to drink it. If she was to remain in this cesspool, she'd need something much stronger.

Her phone rang, a withheld number yet again, just as jarring, even if she should have been used to it by now. She'd pick up, the caller would remain silent, and she'd hear a decidedly disgusting mouth-breathing at the other end of the line. Then she'd either curse the person out or simply hang up. But either way it seemed like no matter how she reacted, she would lose and give whomever had been terrorizing her for years exactly what they wanted.

This time, Magdalene swiped away the call, something she'd been doing more and more recently, and tried very hard to put it out of her mind despite the haunting sensation crawling up her spine.

It happened then. She'd tuned out the dirty stares and inappropriate leers. And yet, among the many still lingering on her skin, a certain heat teased her more than pricked. Like a gentle feather. Tentative, careful.

Behind the menu, Magdalene closed her eyes and focused on the sensation for a moment. In the sea of nobodies, among their irreverent and irrelevant glances, this set of eyes on her skin was electric.

Slowly, she lifted her gaze above the edge of the menu, and ran headlong into the darkness of those eyes. Fire, desire burned in them, but above

everything, they held honesty.

The stranger looked at her with so much earnest sincerity, Magdalene couldn't help but smile. And although her face was still mostly hidden, she knew the woman could tell, because the answering grin, slightly rusty, was just as open as that initial gaze had been.

The transformation was quite dazzling. Magdalene caught herself leisurely perusing the woman's face, cataloging the features that seemed to be so surprised to be noticed, it was touching, really.

A thin face, framed by light-blonde, flyaway hair, pulled back into an honest-to-god braid—something that should appear provincial and gauche in the middle of Manhattan, yet managed to be charming instead. Refreshing.

The cutting cheekbones, stubborn jaw, and a mouth that looked like something Magdalene very much wanted to spend a considerable amount of time on, created an illusion of duality. Naiveté and danger.

Magdalene inwardly laughed at her own characterization of the girl. Because surely this twenty-something year-old was no threat to her at all. And on top of the honesty, the lack of pretense, and the openness of those immense gray pools, this *was* but a girl. A girl who was motioning for the bartender, and within mere moments, a glass of whiskey appeared in front of Magdalene.

So perhaps she truly wasn't quite gauche, because the hesitance of the gaze was coupled with total control over her gestures toward other people and the task at hand, and that gave Magdalene a little thrill.

Just enough of one to have her lift the glass and silently toast the girl—a gesture that seemed to suffice for the stranger to stand up, take several steps in her direction, and sit down on the stool next to hers.

Magdalene frowned. If she had expected to be asked permission, she'd been mistaken. Because what followed was not something she was accustomed to. She was accustomed to people kowtowing to her, asking her, so the gesture—or lack thereof—took her slightly aback. Bold.

And yet, when the stranger spoke, she stumbled over the very first sentence, and that little hitch of breath, coupled with those chiseled high cheekbones catching fire, was so endearing amidst the boldness and bravado, it enchanted Magdalene instantly.

A beat, another, and they both reached for their drinks at the same time, their hands brushing. And if this were a romance novel, Magdalene would have been hard-pressed not to admit that she felt an electric current pass

between them. As it stood, she decided that static electricity must be at fault for whatever jolt she'd felt. So she just lifted her tumbler again and smiled from behind it.

The woman—because upon closer inspection, Magdalene came to realize this was very much a woman and not the girl she'd believed her to be from across the room—was surprisingly silent, appearing to be content with the nearness and the shared intimacy of a drink.

And it *felt* intimate. Magdalene had the somewhat fanciful sensation of being enshrouded in a cocoon of comfort and silence. She closed her eyes for a second to savor it along with the whiskey, the smoky taste lingering on her tongue.

When she re-opened them, their gray counterparts were hooded, focused yet not demanding. What a talent it was to give someone your full attention and make it warm instead of piercing.

When the stranger finally spoke, it was like a combination of punches.

"I feel I should apologize." At Magdalene's raised eyebrow, the corners of the unsmiling mouth lifted slightly. "I confess I sent you the drink because I was gawking. And that makes me no better than the rest of the people in this bar."

A left hook in the form of a slightly tremulous low voice, and a right jab disguised as a very unexpected opening, that honesty again.

"Are you going to say that, unlike the rest of them, you strive for individuality? Hence the direct approach?"

The woman's mouth stretched wider, revealing an even set of white teeth, before the tantalizing lower lip was sucked in and released again in slow motion.

"If I were to, as you put it, 'strive for individuality,' I'd have opened with poetry."

Magdalene's hand itched to tug on one of the flyaways framing the thin face. She told herself it was because she wanted to know what that burnished gold felt like on her skin and not because it would bring that face closer.

"Most definitely poetry. Something to state my interest, yet assure you that this is exactly what you want it to be."

Bold. So very bold.

"And what *do* I want this to be?" It took all her training and all her willpower not to let her voice betray her need.

Instead of an answer, she got an uppercut to her jaw, and for all intents

and purposes, ended up on the ropes. She would take this woman up to her room.

“*I like it that I’m not what ails you... And I like that my ache is not for you...*”

“Marina Tsvetaeva, *I Like It.*” Magdalene forced her voice to sound as nonchalant as she could. “Why?”

“It seemed perfect for a beautiful woman sitting alone in the middle of a crowded bar in Manhattan with seemingly no purpose other than to while away the time. Be it alone... Or with someone.” The woman ran her fingers over the rim of her wine glass, her eyes distant. And whilst the loud noise surrounding them didn’t quite allow Magdalene to hear the quiet melody of the glass singing under the long fingers, she had the urge to re-cross her legs.

Then the faraway look dissipated, and the woman smiled again, a little sheepishly, which made her even more attractive. “What can I say? I just hoped you wouldn’t think I’m crazy. After all, how many people on this island know about early 20th-century tragic Russian poets?”

“Not many, I grant you that.” Magdalene kept her voice questing, hoping her companion would reveal more.

“Well, I don’t know what that makes me then. Nerdy?” A deft tongue peaked from behind a row of teeth with another shy smile, and Magdalene had a thought of those teeth leaving a mark on her neck, one she’d have to cover for days.

The stranger, thankfully unaware of Magdalene’s rumination, lowered her eyes, still smiling widely.

“*I like it that I can be ridiculous, and talk too much...*” The self-deprecation was something Magdalene found immensely attractive, that mild jab at herself. Yet she couldn’t allow anyone to have the upper hand.

“Ah, but the next line in that poem is, *‘and not flush in a suffocating wave when our arms touch,’* and I believe just a few minutes ago you seemed to do exactly that when our hands brushed.”

Crimson suffused the woman's cheeks again. Magdalene had watched it creep up the undone collar of the button-down shirt, and wanted to chase it, touch it, taste it.

“I find it... cute. Adorable. That, despite quoting poetry and sending over the best whiskey in the house, I can still make you blush.”

They shared a look, the fires dancing in the gray depths opposite her stirring something unnamed in Magdalene.

As her thoughts tangled with lust and the hint of possibility, it hit her. A déjà vu of sorts, although she was certain she had never seen this stranger prior to this in her life. The return of a feeling she'd experienced before, yet couldn't place. It spelled a warning Magdalene knew she should heed. And she was always so disciplined, so careful to follow the signs and steer clear.

Magdalene curled her fingers into her palm, trying to keep herself from reaching out, when the stranger surprised her yet again. The dichotomy of boldness and shyness evident, she lifted a trembling hand and slowly brought it to Magdalene's sternum. Their eyes met, and the gray ones widened almost imperceptibly—whether in surprise at her own boldness or in a silent bid for permission.

When Magdalene closed hers in acquiescence, she felt soft fingertips slowly caress her collarbone. Just one touch, a second, no more, and when she looked up, the world was changed, its focus narrowed on a single point, as the woman—just as leisurely—brought those fingertips to her mouth, and Magdalene's breath caught. The stranger was tasting her.

Something that was weaving itself together under Magdalene's skin snapped taut, and what else was she to do? A second, two, and she took those still wet fingers into her hand and pulled the woman to her feet.

“I assume you have a room?”

Before she dragged her in the direction of the elevators, Magdalene downed her whiskey in one greedy gulp, a drop of whiskey lingering on her lip, and she licked it away with anticipation as the woman signed for their drinks. She let go of the hand, the skin on skin overwhelming her and making her afraid to hold on for too long. It was all she could do to not jump this woman right then and there.

The ping counting the floors matched her heartbeat, growing louder the closer the elevator got. When it deafened her, the doors opened. The instant they stepped inside, whatever thin veneer of control still remained, cracked.

She was not quite sure how her entire gambit got thrown out the window, but in the blink of an eye, she was backed up against the closing doors and devoured.

Magdalene had no better word for it. The gentle hands that had played with the wine glass and held hers tentatively earlier were now firm and sure, cupping her face, delving into her hair, the long lithe body, all muscle and sinew, pressed to hers, holding her in place. And that mouth, the austere unsmiling lines of it, once it descended, left her nothing. Those lips

consumed it all in one fell swoop. Her breath, her moan, her sanity.

She rarely kissed her one-night stands. Not that she had that many, and not that she didn't enjoy kissing per se. She did. But it was... intimate. So she often withheld it, withheld herself, since none of those women elicited that sensation. And they seemed quite content to go along and to accept the crumbs she gave them. After all, they had her for those few hours, and whether they cared to which extent they got to have all of her or not, Magdalene, to be blunt, didn't give a damn.

This woman, though? She rendered all of Magdalene's previous experiences moot. She simply took. And Magdalene, usually the aggressor in any such game, gave in and instead just gave. The sensation of surrender swept through her like a summer storm, powerful, frightening, then cleansed, and she relaxed, pliant now, answering the fire with her own, biting that lower lip, letting the insistent tongue in and pushing back into the kiss.

Her hands dove for the woman's waist, tearing at the shirt, seeking skin, finding it, the smooth hard planes of a disciplined body, the soft silk and muscle rippling under her touch. She was greeted with a sigh, the fingers in her hair tightening a fraction, pulling her face away, so their eyes met as Magdalene's fingers crept up, leaving scratches as she went.

And yes, everything was different this time, whether it was the danger sign flashing in her mind, or that unnamed feeling she couldn't quite describe. Unlike any of the others, she wanted to mark this one, to leave red welts and bite marks and traces of purple all over this skin that was heating up under her touch.

The eyes grew hooded, almost closing as she reached the bottom of the bra and unceremoniously tugged it up, but then she was being kissed again, her hands caught and immobilized at her sides as her mouth was devoured once more.

In the distance, the ping of the elevator passing floors sounded hazy and disjointed, and a thigh insinuated itself between her legs, hiking her skirt all the way up and brushing against her center without actually giving her anything, anything at all of what she craved. Then the world stopped.

As suddenly as she'd been flung against the smooth metal doors, she was released, keenly aware of how cold her front was suddenly becoming. The elevator was motionless and dark, bar the red emergency light.

The contrast was so intense, Magdalene thought she must have hit her head. Once her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she finally looked up at the

stranger in front of her. The disparity between light and dark had nothing on the starkness of this woman's transformation.

The confident—albeit slightly shy—stranger from the bar and the absolute force-of-nature who'd almost taken her against the elevator doors were gone. Magdalene was face to face with the trembling shell of that woman.

Her ragged breaths were loud in the confines of the small space—

Small space!

“I'm claustrophobic. Ah, not much, but enough, I guess. I'm sorry. I, ah...”

The halting words sounded nothing like the woman from the bar, yet they confirmed Magdalene's earlier suspicions.

Oh hell...

Slowly, unseeingly, her companion's hand reached for the elevator wall behind her. She took a tentative step back, then another, and then slid down the mirrored wall to the carpeted floor at Magdalene's feet.

Even sitting down, she was shaking so hard, Magdalene thought she would unravel at the seams. *Surely not...* But one look at the woman almost sprawled on the floor told her all she needed.

Panic attack.

For reasons she didn't want to analyze too closely, for the second time in one day, Magdalene Nox did something totally uncharacteristic. She sat down, Armani skirt be damned, and held out a hand, laying it palm up on the floor, the carpet scratchy and disgusting beneath her skin.

Years of being a teacher and extensive psychological training had fully prepared her for this kind of incident, no matter how much she told herself she never *cared like this*, 'This' being getting involved with whomever she chose to spend the night with. She had her reasons; she fucked them and left them. The most she could stretch her own benevolence to was to make sure the door was fully locked on her way out.

Right now, though? She was well aware of what she needed to do, yet she remained puzzled by her own willingness to do it. But then she had been surprising herself all evening. What was one more?

When a trembling hand slowly lowered itself on top of hers, she gently intertwined their fingers, anchoring more than holding.

“Star Trek or Star Wars? And believe me, there is only one correct answer to this question.”

Her tack seemed to catch the woman by surprise, as she let out a huff of laughter that might have been a sob. In the eerie red glow of the emergency light, the already massive eyes seemed to grow further, and then the swollen mouth opened and closed, making Magdalene think of how she'd been the one who had gotten those lips to swell under the onslaught of her own. She pressed her thighs closer together as the stranger took her time answering.

“Ah, if I say Star Trek, will the answer signal the end of our night?”

The tentative reply made Magdalene's lips twitch, and she squeezed the fingers lightly.

“I guess that would depend on the captain of choice.”

“Janeway, always Janeway. Coffee and let the world burn.”

Magdalene was almost afraid that they wouldn't make it to the room. She felt like crawling out of her skin, desire like fire raised the hairs on her arms and shallowed her breathing.

THE MOMENT they were rescued from the elevator, it was a race against the clock and against each other to get to the room and then... Then all bets were off. Everything was off, really. Her blouse was the first thing to be hastily undone and flung somewhere in one deft motion, and then a hot mouth abandoned hers to proceed to kiss and bite and lick every inch of her exposed neck and chest, hands pinning her against the door, leaving her no choice but to submit. Again.

With the last vestiges of cogent thought, Magdalene considered how strange it was, this position she found herself in. Since her divorce and the subsequent one-night-stands and short-term affairs, she'd always been the one in control. It was merely easier that way. Not that she never allowed the other women to touch her, she very much did. But she guided those interactions and was always the one in charge of how they progressed.

To understand that she didn't actually want to control this encounter? And to realize it like this? She was 46 years old, and it had never occurred to her that all she wanted, all she needed, was to let go and to be taken.

Like what was happening right now. There was no other word for it. She was being taken, her body consumed, her hands pinned, and she was reveling in the rush of power that flooded her, despite being motionless, despite being

held very still. It made her feel invincible, hungry, ravenous for more...

She freed her hands and plunged them into that burnished gold she'd been so greedy to touch earlier and tugged hard. The stranger gasped and lifted her face from where she had certainly been leaving a dark mark on the top of Magdalene's breast, lips crimson red now, blood pulsing under the silk-smooth skin. Magdalene had to have it, that mouth, she needed it on hers, desperately, like air. And so she pulled until they were kissing again.

Even then, it wasn't enough, to the point where she wanted to stomp her foot and demand more. And demands be damned, she would plead and beg until she was given what she wanted, even as she was surrounded by it.

"Please..."

Magdalene raked her nails up and down those lanky arms, digging into the muscle, wanting to burrow into the bone, to anchor herself in this sensation of finally being given what she craved.

The pleading seemed to spurn on her lover, ravishing then abandoning her mouth once again, tracking down her body, licking and biting everything within reach, her neck, her collarbones, tracing invisible lines down her torso, branding her in ways Magdalene hadn't even fathomed were possible—like tattoos, small bites, nips, and open-mouthed kisses were driving her insane for more.

Finally, her skirt was pulled up, and she could hear the astonished exhalation at the sight of her stockings, the hot breath caressing Magdalene's thighs, getting closer to where she needed it most. Then the stranger suddenly stopped.

She almost banged her head against the door supporting her, frustration clawing at her throat.

What the fuck had just happened?

She opened her eyes, forcing them to focus. They flitted around the room before finally landing on the sight below her, and those claws of frustration were replaced instantly with an almost violent haze of lust.

On her knees, blonde disheveled hair, swollen crimson lips and the darkened eyes swallowing her whole, the woman was a vision. Mussed, flushed, and above all absolutely insatiable—and yet, that duality that had made her so attractive earlier, the combination of bold and shy, was on display once more. A delectable lower lip was sucked in again in what Magdalene was beginning to recognize as a nervous gesture, yet it made the woman even more alluring, because Magdalene was certain she had no idea

how unbelievably attractive it was.

And then the low, halting voice spoke words that took considerable willpower and concentration for Magdalene to even decipher.

“I... ah... Under the circumstances... Damn it, I’m Sam, by the way, and I’ve been tested, if you’re wondering...”

Magdalene sucked in a breath, realizing it hadn’t crossed her mind, and felt foolish for even considering giving her name. She knew better, had always been prudent in her encounters. Yet this? What was so special about this one that she kept ignoring every single directive she lived by? Well, one thing she would not deviate from, no matter how tempted she was.

“I’ve been tested as well. And no names, darling. Names are not what this is about.”

She saw the exact moment the meaning of her words reached the kneeling woman at her feet, the sting of insult, so evident in those expressive eyes. The thing that pulled inside her chest in that moment frightened her, the impulse to allay, to soothe, and to give the woman what she wanted. Something Magdalene had never shared with any of her fleeting paramours before. Her name.

She took a deep breath, trying to push away the sudden flood of emotion, and to instead focus on the present. Her fingers delved into the silky strands once more, and she tugged gently. Despite the earlier pout, Sam did not hesitate even for a second, and that swollen mouth found her center.

Then all concerns and unwanted emotions were vanquished from her mind, like words from her mouth, falling one by one, without any conscious decision of hers. She knew she was moaning, chanting profanities, incoherent encouragements, and curses. She’d be hard-pressed to explain what was happening to her.

Magdalene had had good sex. Magdalene had had very good sex, in fact. Men, women... Well, mostly women... But this? This was not just good. This was an awakening.

Sam... Sam... Sam...

She had the presence of mind not to let the name slip from her lips. It would make this more than they’d agreed upon, but Sam, with every lick, tug, nip of that wonderful mouth, was transforming Magdalene.

It was embarrassingly quick, her first release. And it wasn’t so much a release as a destruction. A wreck. A wave that overtook her, thrashed her around, then threw her on the shore, breathless, hoarse and drenched.

On her knees, at Magdalene's feet, Sam slowly withdrew the fingers Magdalene couldn't remember having thrust into her and slowly licked them clean. The edges of her vision blacked, and she crumbled, collapsing into Sam as if her life depended on it. Maybe it did.

Pushing her lover backwards, they tumbled onto the floor in a tangle of sweat, limbs, and what little remained of their clothes. Except, as she lowered her mouth, marking her way down Sam's sternum, strong hands gripped her hips, and within a split-second, she was lifted. And was there anything hotter than chiseled, strong arms, and how absolutely gay did that thought make her? Surely no gayer than the words that followed.

Because when Sam murmured "I am not done with you yet," as she arched her long, graceful neck and lifted her mouth back to where Magdalene ached for her still, she was sure she'd faint. She was dripping down her thighs, her own fingers pinching her nipples as her lover devoured her again and again.

WHEN THEY ENDED up on the bed, Magdalene had Sam on her knees, taking three fingers and hiding her face in a pillow to muffle her moans. It wasn't working, the shaky sounds still escaping, and something primitive in Magdalene was reveling in the feral animals they had turned each other into. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been this out of control. She was certain it had never happened before.

They were insatiable. Sam reached for her as Magdalene's fingers still felt the velvet walls contracting around them, only to start all over, that mouth, and Magdalene's body that seemed to know no satiation where this woman was concerned.

Two, three, four orgasms, and she was as ravenous as when those lips had first connected with her skin. When that tongue had first entered her. When that mouth had first closed over her clit.

The light from the street fell in stripes over them, and she let out a low sound, a whisper of a moan really, since even her voice was no longer to be trusted. As her fifth peak approached, Magdalene's eyes locked with those of her lover watching her in rapture. The sincerity of that look, the wide eyes holding such emotion, such honesty in their desire, in their tenderness...

If Magdalene could have run away at that very moment instead of chasing yet another climax, she would have. Because those eyes were deadly. And the inherent danger, the one that had stirred unease in her earlier, was an absolute dealbreaker.

Even as she reached the peak again, she knew with emphatic certainty that she would walk away the second that devastating mouth lifted off her.

OF PERSPICACIOUS MOTHERS & FUCHSIA BOAS

There were advantages to her mother buying a new house after every divorce for as long as Magdalene could remember. Granted, she had no place to call home, as she had been steadfastly refusing to buy real estate herself for the stated reason of not staying anywhere long enough to settle.

The unstated reason was puzzling even to her. No place felt right, and she seemed unable to move past this deep-seated sensation that she had already found the spot where she was supposed to be, but hadn't recognized it.

The lack of any kind of emotional attachment seemed a rare blessing these days. She was restless, like a caged animal prowling the terraces and multiple dining rooms and sitting rooms, and whatever else her mother called these ridiculously appointed spaces where no one ever dined or sat.

Why did this baffling woman need a house with 13 bedrooms and 17 bathrooms? And why were these the details Magdalene was forcing her overtired brain to focus on?

Well, if she were to be honest with herself, the latter would be easier to answer. For the past month, she'd studied Dragons' paperwork, she'd slept, she ate on occasion; she went about the dregs of her last days at St. Mary's, handing over the responsibilities to the new Headmaster—or at least pretending to by not standing in the way of it, since George was actually handling most of the logistics.

George...

Her mind seized the name and latched onto it. For the past three days now, her planner had highlighted the bullet point of 'return George's calls,' and she kept postponing it. She'd come down to St. Mary's, cleaned out most of her personal effects, and hightailed it to her mother's in a very deliberate—

if very cowardly—act of self-preservation.

Except, as she wandered the many rooms and hallways, the kitschy surroundings both jarring and strangely comforting, she wondered why—of all the places in the world she could go—she would choose her mother’s house. After all, with her money, no hotel, resort, or secluded refuge was out of her price range. What succor was she hoping to find here? And why was she avoiding absolutely everyone, even those who had a legitimate claim to her time?

With regards to George, it was an easy enough answer. She had known Magdalene for two decades. She would notice her distractedness, her melancholy, or whatever it was that had her in its grip. And George, bless her, would ask questions and try to fix things and cheer her up, and Magdalene had absolutely no need for any of that.

What Magdalene did need was... Her thoughts ground to a stop, the cartoonish screech of the proverbial brakes making her smile. Then images of her night in New York with Sam flooded her memory.

Memories and regrets.

Even by her own standards, she’d behaved like a coward. Dawn had been breaking when Sam dozed off, and Magdalene’s sense of self-preservation had won out. She’d been trying to locate her panties, only to find them in tatters by the doorway, when her eyes landed on a folder lying neatly on a little table next to it. There, the familiar logo of the Teachers’ Association Conference stared at her. The potential implications of this were devastating.

Sam was clearly an attendee, and with Magdalene’s speech finally being slated for the following day, her anonymity would be shattered. For all the damn effort she had put into avoiding the convention crowd—not that she’d had any intention to hook up with anyone—it had all been for naught. The folder had glared at her, all poison and retribution, and Magdalene had all but run from the room, from New York, from Sam.

Sam...

The name alone made Sam special. Names suddenly gave people a real and memorable quality. Magdalene suspected that Sam would have been real and very much unforgettable all on her own, but knowing this indelible piece of information about her, added a layer like an etching on her skin. One that both burned and soothed at the same time.

Sam...

No, Magdalene didn’t have any second thoughts about canceling her

appearance at the conference, blaming her decisions on the lack of proper organization and the general chaos of the event. But she did regret the way she'd left Sam, even if there'd been no alternative—not with Sam being a teacher and with now more than intimate knowledge of Magdalene Nox's off-the-clock proclivities.

She couldn't allow that information to make the rounds among educators, and certainly not now when she was on the cusp of stepping into her dream.

Sam...

And yet, *despite, despite, despite...* So many things were between them to warrant so many 'despites,' that Magdalene couldn't stop herself from repeating the name. It was troubling, especially because she kept telling herself she didn't want to know it at all.

There was a reason she'd never shared any details with her one-night-stands. She'd been single for five years, indulged in these kinds of affairs when her professional responsibilities allowed her, and she'd never once asked the names of these women.

The sheer number of other things she hadn't done, or known, or considered in her five years of finally allowing herself the luxury of loving women—

She stopped her prowling abruptly when a buzzing noise interrupted her line of thought. Her phone lit up on the coffee table in front of her, among the spreadsheets she was supposed to be perusing and the notes she was studiously avoiding. Her heart sped up. She'd changed her number, again, and there had been a few weeks' lull with the anonymous calls. But the mouth breather on the other end always tended to find her.

Magdalene took a deep breath. She wouldn't let anyone dictate how she lived her life, especially not some psychopath. Another deep breath and she picked up the ringing device.

One look and Magdalene raised her eyes towards the ceiling, her earlier prediction that she wouldn't be able to avoid George much longer confirmed. Her secretary was quite persistent. As Magdalene turned the phone away from herself, she shrugged. There was absolutely nothing that St. Mary's needed at this time that George couldn't solve, and if this were Dragons' business, Timothy would be the one reaching out to her.

"I see 'no' doesn't mean 'no' to that woman."

Her mother forgot her birthday almost every year, didn't as much as send flowers for particular celebrations, yet she had the uncanny ability to know

exactly what Magdalene was doing when and with whom.

She stood stock-still, not wanting to give her mother the satisfaction of showing that she'd startled her, even though she knew that Candace would see through her attempt at composure, if only she chose to pay attention.

Studying her manicure, as she leaned on the doorframe, Candace was a picture of nonchalance.

“Can't she see you're busy woolgathering? A woman needs time to daydream, work be damned. I don't even know why you're pretending to be taking notes, since the ink in that fountain pen dried out three days ago, after you filled it up last and proceeded to leave it open on the table.”

Well, it appeared her mother had been paying attention, after all. Which meant only one thing: Misdirection was in order.

“I have never known you to not like my friends, mother.”

In a cloud of bespoke Guerlain, specially prepared for her for the past three decades by the French fashion house, Candace Clarice Fontainebleau Lamarque, since she seemed to finally have settled on a few last names she liked—*CC*, *Candace*, *that bitch*, but never *Candy*—swept into the room in a fuchsia boa and a tightly fitting yellow dress. It showed off her statuesque figure to perfection. Tall, slim, long-limbed, and graceful as the ballerina she had once aspired to become, Candace shook her long, blonde hair away from the angular face that was so much like Magdalene's, and mother and daughter stared at each other for a moment.

Dyed platinum-blond hair and preposterous fashion sense aside, Magdalene felt as if she was looking into the mirror of her future, thirty years from now. The symmetry took her by surprise. She was exactly the age Candace had been when they'd thrown Magdalene out of Dragons. Forty six. She wondered what she would have done differently in her mother's place thirty years ago, then wanted to laugh, because the answer was surely everything.

Still, being her mother's spitting image had always been both a blessing and a curse. If her grandmother was to be believed, she had absolutely won the genetic lottery. Her father had been described to her as a little troll of a man countless times. But this meant she was also spared any and all surprises—including any pleasant ones.

She ran her hand surreptitiously up and down her neck, left bare by the cut of her dress, and tried not to think about how, a few years from now, she'd likely be the one covering it up with scarves.

Her mother, clearly in a mind-reading mode, took one look from where she was pouring herself a brandy and threw a nonchalant, “Hermes will be your best friend, my girl. But you still have years and years to pick your scarves.”

She proceeded to perch on the sofa opposite Magdalene with impeccable posture. When the phone rang again, she scrunched her nose with such disdain, it was almost comical, and dropped another bombshell.

“I never had any issues with your friends, Magdalene. But there are friends, and then there is *this*.” A vague hand gesture towards the phone was all the explanation Magdalene got.

“George is doing her job, mother. She just wants to help.” Magdalene picked up the useless fountain pen and closed it. She had been daydreaming, that much her mother was right about. Regardless of whatever bug had crawled up her... bonnet, regarding George, of all people.

“Oh, I’m sure she’d love to give you a hand alright.”

Magdalene’s mouth fell open. Her mother hadn’t just gone there, had she? She couldn’t quite believe her ears, so she decided she must have misheard. Meanwhile, Candace tsked, her face inscrutable, then waved her hand again, and continued.

“George is...” At her mother’s silence, Magdalene raised her eyes, only to run headlong into Candace’s speculative stare. “... not important. What has you uncomfortable?”

Yes, today was definitely comeuppance day. And what had Magdalene expected? For her mother to allow her to show up on her doorstep and stay with her for days without any explanation? Other people might have parents who would have been happy for their child to merely spend time with them—in their gigantic space with 13 bedrooms where, if Candace wished to never even see Magdalene, she absolutely could.

Except Candace was not those other parents. Candace was Candace, and Magdalene’s time was up. She relaxed her shoulders—one had been taught to never show predatory animals any fear, after all—and threw her mother a bone.

“I was offered Dragons.”

Saying the four words out loud felt strange, yet right. Like they belonged in a sentence in that exact order, spoken out loud.

She was offered Dragons.

Magdalene closed her eyes and let the sound settle around her. When she

opened them again, Candace simply continued to take small sips of her favored twenty-five-year-old brandy and stare at Magdalene. The only outward reaction to her hearing the news was the slight narrowing of her eyes.

“I will start in a few weeks, once all the details are settled.”

“Is that worthless ex-husband of yours in on this, too?”

Magdalene couldn't help but laugh at her mother's cutting remark.

“I find it hilarious that he absolutely adores you, and you think him worthless.”

Candace finally set down the crystal tumbler and looked past Magdalene towards the fireplace mantel, symbolic in its bareness. In fact, all the abundant mantels—be it in this new house or any of the other places her mother had inhabited—had been empty. No mementoes or family photographs for Candace.

“That man would adore Satan himself if it meant he could maintain a connection to you. I assume he took whatever those foolish men on that ridiculous board of that godforsaken school threw at him just to be able to stay in your orbit.”

Well, her mother was just landing blow after blow today.

“Mother—”

“Don't ‘mother’ me, Magdalene. I have my lunches with him, and I don't poison his tea. I don't think you can ask for more. Your grandmother would have resorted to arsenic by now.”

“For being annoying?” Magdalene stood and wandered over to the large windows. The view of the massive park behind the mansion was more suitable for something akin to Pemberley or another estate in the English countryside, rather than this gaudy monstrosity in Massachusetts.

“For hurting you.”

The swift turn to once again face her mother almost gave her whiplash.

Well, damn.

Candace, however, for all her previous perceptiveness, barreled on and didn't note the pain or the hope in Magdalene's eyes, which she knew she hadn't been quick enough to disguise.

“You shouldn't have stayed married to that wastrel for fifteen years. You should have given it no more than two, then gotten a divorce and moved on. Time is always a woman's biggest enemy. Smith women stay young longer—with appropriate surgical work, which you should really start looking into

—but it truly wasn't at all smart of you to put all your stocks into that man. I thought I'd taught you better than that.”

Talk about whiplash.

“Well, if you mean you taught me by example...” Magdalene raised an eyebrow and left the sentence dangling, infusing it with a touch of venom—mostly to feel better about herself in this particular moment, certain that she'd regret goading her mother, eventually. She didn't appreciate being told that, despite years of pouring herself into a relationship, it failed anyway. That she had been either too much or not enough. Five years later, and Magdalene still tried to puzzle out which one it was, or whether both could be true at the same time. And her mother rubbing salt into old unhealed wounds, even if to cauterize them, wasn't something she needed right now.

But Candace didn't take the bait.

“I lived my life the way I wanted, Magdalene. Every decision was mine and mine alone. Nobody and nothing determined the course of my destiny.”

Her mother's eyes, so like her own, sparked with something Magdalene couldn't decipher, and she wasn't about to attribute anything affectionate to Candace. Not when she had the ability to strike with vicious precision in the most heartwarming of moments.

“Are you saying I haven't done as I choose?”

Candace got up to stand by her, and after a breath, another, raised a veiny, perfectly manicured hand and—with meticulous care and precision—placed it on Magdalene's shoulder. Her mother didn't touch anything but her sleeve, and Magdalene figured that was a most deliberate choice. Nonetheless, even through the layer of wool, she felt Candace's warmth, diluted as it was.

“I am saying that I never stopped. In one place, with one man. I never allowed one thing to become my sole focus, my girl.”

And this time, the appellation, one that she'd heard mostly as a term of possession throughout her life, sounded—dare she believe?—sincere. Still, Magdalene waited for the sharp edge of the knife, because this was her mother after all, and both honesty and warmth always came at a price where Candace was concerned.

But nothing followed, and her mother quietly lowered her hand and sat back down, occupying the seat Magdalene had vacated earlier, and slowly leafed through the papers strewn across the coffee table.

“I heard about some of the changes in that wretched place, you know. I didn't realize things were this dire.”

Hearing that her mother had been keeping up with current events at Dragons, Magdalene bit her lip, trying to limit her outward reaction as much as possible. Inwardly it was a different story, altogether.

The woman who had either shuffled her from place to place, forgot about her entirely, or used her as a convenient prop at her numerous weddings, had not only understood the importance of Dragons to Magdalene, but kept her finger on the pulse of said importance. Magdalene threw her a surreptitious sideways glance, but Candace just lifted an elegant, bony shoulder.

“It’s right there.” Another shrug, this time in the direction of Suffolk and the Atlantic Ocean. And Dragons. “Plus, Stanton and his cronies are all rather visible figures at all the society events.”

Stanton... Magdalene’s suddenly cold fingers involuntarily lifted to her sternum as her mother continued. She took a few inadvertent steps towards the sofa.

“He is planning on running again, you know?” Candace, who was still leafing through the papers, stopped at a particular one for a long moment before handing it to Magdalene. She reached for it on instinct. The faculty list.

“I didn’t know, mother. Running for what?” List in hand, her eyes roamed across the spreadsheet, trying to keep up with her mother and perhaps anticipate where the next slap would come from—or at least figure out what hidden treasure or trap was among the twenty-something names. Her fingers were still cold, and her heart was beating in overtime, filled with the same hatred she’d felt upon seeing Stanton Alden in New York. Just like in that moment, Magdalene didn’t know what she hated more, Dragons or this man who’d taken it away from her. And if it were him, what would that bode for Dragons then?

“Governor. He’s not a big enough deal within the party to pursue anything on a national level. And he has too much baggage.”

Ah... Gossip. There was really precious little that brought this particular level of vicious joy to Candace’s face beyond rumor and innuendo. She carefully lowered the paper in her hand and perched on the sofa directly opposite her mother. Granted undivided attention, Candace’s bicolored eyes turned avaricious.

“He has changed his will.”

Magdalene exhaled slowly, the desire to roll her eyes strong, but she realized it would end whatever moment of confidence they were sharing.

“I don’t even want to know how you have this absolutely privileged information, mother. Are you sleeping with his lawyer?”

Candace had the decency to look sheepish.

“In any case, his boys all died, the eldest, Edward—you remember him. Tall, blond, very handsome. The one I thought would perhaps be good for you. Before they caught you with Hilda, that is—”

“What?”

Her head spun. Candace knew? Her mother hadn’t introduced her to a potential suitor, because she was aware of her queerness? It had been thirty years. Surely, if Candace knew, Magdalene would have never heard the end of it.

“What, what?” Another shrug, but this one just a touch contrived. Magdalene had developed a finely-tuned Candace bullshit-radar, honed by years of practice. So she continued to stare down her mother until Candace relented. “If you think for a second that I didn’t know why my only child was thrown out of what was the most prestigious boarding school in New England... Not that it’s not a pile of trash now.” The latter part had been mumbled under her breath.

They looked at each other then.

“And yet you said nothing.” Magdalene’s breath hitched, her astonishment complete.

“What was I supposed to say? You were sixteen and heartbroken. I sent you to Europe and gave you that hideous watch you keep wearing.” Candace pointed her empty brandy glass towards Magdalene’s Vacheron, which was dangling heavily on her wrist as always, before continuing.

“I also found another school for you. Did you want me to have a conversation about the birds and the bees with you, Magdalene?” Candace shifted uncomfortably on the more than comfortable couch, and the corners of Magdalene’s mouth twitched.

“No, I just—”

“I never cared about who you slept with, Magdalene. Despite my few shortcomings as a mother, my voting record, or my off-shore financial holdings, your sexuality was never an issue for me.”

A few shortcomings...

Magdalene suppressed a snort, and when the revelation had sunk in, she opened, then slowly closed her mouth. Not that she hadn’t wondered whether her mother might know. An eighteen-year-old Magdalene had been ready to

give up everything for Candace's best friend at the time, a very-much married and very-much-in-her-forties Dolores Evergreen Lopez. Candace had never said a word, and Magdalene had believed that her mother didn't care one way or the other.

However, if Magdalene found her mother's proclamation surprising, the revelations just kept on coming.

"You have been after that accursed school for three decades. I know, because I didn't give you that watch as a penance, and yet, despite all the money in the world, you keep wearing it, like a ball and chain."

Magdalene shook her wrist, the habit long ingrained under the weight of the heavy platinum and steel. The Vacheron made the now-familiar sound, all expensive metal and regret.

"And while I have my thoughts on that," Candace pointed a coral tipped finger towards the watch, "and on how healthy or unhealthy that might be, I have to say I am astonished at you. And because you so rarely surprise me, my girl, I'm concerned."

So the conversation may not be about the watch, after all. Magdalene stood up, preparing for whatever her mother was about to unleash. Yet Candace's eyes turned gentle instead. Such a rare sight, Magdalene almost gaped.

"You've wanted to be in this damn position longer than you've had the watch. And I think you've been wearing it all these years to remind yourself of whatever imaginary debt you think they owe you." This time, Magdalene did gape.

However, Candace wasn't done. "They finally gave you what you've been striving for, no matter how unhealthy this desire of yours may have been. And yet here you are, barely touching the paperwork and walking from room to room in a daze. Now if you were me, I'd say this is about dick. But since you're not me and bisexuality is weirdly a thing for you, it's a toss up. Still, let me put my money on pussy."

For a moment, Magdalene was certain she hadn't heard her mother correctly. But then Candace smiled widely, too widely, because she knew she'd scored a direct hit, then stood up from the couch and waved both of her hands at Magdalene, who could feel the heat rise in her cheeks.

"My girl, whoever it is, whatever happened between you, keep your eyes on the prize. You've waited thirty years. I may not support this obsession, but I understand it. It's your time. Do your worst, and don't let anything stand in

your way. Or should I say ‘lay’?”

With that last shot, Candace stepped out of the room, the scent of Guerlain following her in the fuchsia mist of her boa.

OF FAMILIAR FACES & ENTRANCES WELL MADE

The wind was mussing her hair, tangling the strands that curled just below her jawline, but Magdalene refused to go inside the cabin.

The ferry voyage was, as always, abysmal. She hated absolutely everything about it. The ocean was choppy, making the crew take extra care on their routine passage. Once upon a time, Magdalene had known the schedule for the ferry boats by heart. The fact that the cashier wordlessly handed her a ticket for passage at 9:17AM, a time Magdalene had chosen off the top of her head, somehow unnerved her. Thirty years later, and she still remembered.

So some things hadn't changed. And maybe her mother was right, that holding on to them for this long wasn't entirely healthy. She pushed away the thought, and as she shrugged, the watch jiggled on her wrist, as always too big on her slender arm.

She hugged herself tightly, deliberately ignoring the slight tremble in her fingers. As a testament to things not changing, the cliffs in the distance ahead of her stood sentry, guarding the island she had last stepped off of as a sixteen-year-old. Would they welcome her now, a renowned expert in her field, with a reputation that made thousands stand up straighter, and a name that opened every door in the US education system? Hell, she might as well add the Canadians in there, since they were scared shitless of her as well.

But as the scent of her own perfume stirred up by the relentless wind reached her senses, Magdalene thought that, for all her achievements, for all her strife, there were three entities watching her approach that wouldn't care. The Dragons.

She rubbed her neck and realized that, once she started assigning

sentience to goddamn rocks, she must be overtired. Her sleep had been anything but restful the night prior.

Enough of this nonsense...

Her phone buzzed, and she held her breath just for a second before looking at the display. She exhaled, and this time she picked it up, the movement slower than usual and a touch discombobulated by the thoughts and portents surrounding her.

“Nox.” She drew strength from the one word. Magdalene had not chosen much in her life until she was twenty-five, but the name? The name she’d made her own at marriage, and it was now hers more so than it had ever been Timothy’s. So when the time had come, she’d refused to give it up.

“Maggie-baby!” George’s voice, too cheerful for 9AM, grated in her ear. “Where are you? Please don’t tell me you refused the charter and took a ferry, leaving without me!”

Magdalene winced. Not for one second had she considered that her secretary would have liked to accompany her on her first trip to the island. A place where they’d both be expected to live and work for the next twelve months, yet one George had never set foot on.

“I wanted an early start, George, and I didn’t feel like making the trip with the trustees.”

The guffaw on the other end of the line was loud and heartfelt.

“Oh, you should see them. Huddled inside the cabin, some of them retching. They are having one heck of a journey. I had high hopes Timothy would lose his breakfast as well, but he seems fine, to my immense chagrin.”

George’s voice had taken on a decided note of disappointment, and Magdalene sighed. The battles her friend and her ex-husband fought on the regular were none of her concern. For what was to come, she’d need them both, and if verbal sparring was how they preferred to blow off steam, who was she to deny them?

“I don’t care if you wrestle each other in the middle of the deck, since I’m not there to witness it, just as long as you both make it to the island in one piece. We have work to do, George.”

George’s sigh was exceedingly theatrical. “Oh, I am once again wrapped in the warm embrace of being loved, wanted and needed.”

Magdalene rolled her eyes, hit the *end* button, and pocketed her phone. She’d given the unwanted interruption what little time and heart she could spare. It was all she could muster these days, her mind preoccupied as it was

and her own lack of a well-established course—speaking in boating metaphors—both disturbing and strangely freeing.

Here she was, on the verge of her crowning achievement. The Headmistress of Three Dragons. Her sixteen-year-old self—wishing fire and destruction on this very place that loomed in the distance—surely would have rejoiced. And yet, she did not know what the right path was. Only that the ultimate decision would be hers and hers alone.

“I am the Lord, thy God...”

The words came unbidden, and she could hear them ringing in her ears. Reverend Sanderson, the old bastard, had drilled them into her mind within all of six months. She had never once opened that book since then, yet here she stood, reciting the First Commandment, watching her domain approach with every wave that broke against the ferry’s rugged and rusty bow.

The contours of the cliffs were inescapable now. The ocean rebelled and spewed its might, implacable in its task at breaking them down. And yet they stood arrogant, just as imposing, just as implacable in their impervious indifference.

But she wasn’t made of stone, no matter how much she’d wished she were three decades ago, when these rocks, these waves, these people, and this place broke her. How many times had she sat inside the nook of the Amber Cliff watching the elements battle, wishing she was just as invincible as they were? And in the absence of that, to have the power to pay back her tormentors.

Well, here she was. Holding all that power. So why now, when everything she’d wanted was within her grasp, was her mind replaying how her heart had stuttered in her chest at the trustees’ careless and deliberate cruelty? Why hadn’t she rejoiced and gloated alongside them? Why hadn’t she taken their blanket support as a *carte blanche* to take this place apart brick by brick?

“Isn’t that what you wished for?” Her mother’s voice and that conversation continued to raise her hackles.

“Maybe I’m being contrary?” She remembered firing back at Candace, who’d just laughed.

“You are my daughter, of course you are.” The laughter, so rarely crystal-pure like this, was real, and the deep wrinkles under her mother’s eyes attested to the fact. There was also something akin to pride in that mirth, and it struck Magdalene how little a child—no matter what age—really needed

from a parent. Some approval, a little affection. Some level of reliability within either of those.

She didn't have that stability anywhere in her life, however. Except here. On these godforsaken rocks. They were a constant, standing eternal, guarding this piece of land in the middle of nowhere in the Atlantic.

MAGDALENE CHOSE to disregard the damage the sand and rocks did to her Louboutins as she climbed the path from the ferry dock to the school's magnificent quad, the strap of her briefcase heavy on her shoulder. It wouldn't be the first pair of shoes this place had claimed, and the view that greeted her was worth it.

"Well, damn..." The sentiment escaped her, more inhalation than words. Her lungs burned with the emotion of seeing the old sprawling buildings again. Just as imposing, if somehow gentler than the cliffs, the Three Dragons Boarding School for Girls remained a sight to see. The backs of her eyes began to sting with something she chose to tamp down. But as she tried to ignore it, Magdalene was aware it wasn't the sweeping hatred she'd fervently hoped would overtake her and snap her out of the grotesquely maudlin romantic notions about this place that her mind had been conjuring for weeks.

Her eyes burned and startled, she blinked, willing the tears away, and swallowed the lump of surprising warmth at seeing the place she once thought could be home. She slowly made her way towards where the familiar oaken doors stood open. Gaping like a wound, surely.

Into the breach...

The smell was the same. Wood and stone and industrial cleaner mixed with sweat and coffee. And above all, jasmine. Faint, but unmistakable.

Goddamn June. Goddamn jasmine. Goddamn Dragons.

She stopped for a moment, fishing out a carefully folded cloth from her briefcase and wiped the dust off her shoes. Then she straightened and took her first steps, three decades in the making, on the black marble of the school. The halls were deserted, and only the echo of her heels accompanied her on her now-steady walk through the familiar hallways towards the only source of sound within the building.

The Mess Hall. Where she'd first met Hilda. Where she'd almost choked on her milk, because a girl had smiled at her. She frowned at her own foolishness, dispersing the intrusive thoughts. These were not the memories she needed at the forefront of her consciousness right now. She had a mission, a job to do, and she needed to focus.

The exclamation of a name attracted her attention, and she slowed her steps. She could swear she'd heard Timothy being mentioned. Magdalene rounded a corner, and another set of familiar doors was open in front of her. Beyond them, a group of people huddled around one of the long lunch tables, an epitome of a ragtag bunch, sipping what was probably coffee from white ceramic mugs and... whiskey? A bottle was being passed between the men and women in rumpled clothes, with their unshaved chins and barely combed hair.

The liquor kept changing hands until a stubborn jaw, muscles working in either anger or revulsion, moved in refusal. The whiskey continued its path down the table, but Magdalene's eyes didn't follow it. Her feet had stopped their already slow progress. She blinked as her world narrowed. The conversation faded into the background, in spite of a rather loud, animated voice ringing from the group. Magdalene barely registered the Nox name being spoken again, as her heart stuttered in her chest, one long whimper of supreme anguish set on repeat.

Oh, no... Oh, no...

The blonde hair. She was familiar with how the moonlight reflected off it, how it glowed in the dark, all burnished gold, how it scorched her fingers as she ran them through the disheveled tresses. How it spilled over her heated skin as those sweet, sweet lips branded her thighs.

And the mouth, the once swollen crimson of those lips, now bitten and folded into an anxious line. The dimpled chin, the line she'd traced with her finger, again and again, unable to help herself. Magdalene shook her head to dislodge the image, except it only burrowed deeper into her mind.

Oh, no... Oh, no...

The long, lanky arms, now folded over the small breasts, all pale skin and marks Magdalene herself had once left to be remembered by. Three months had passed, and she could still see those purple petals blooming under the silk and satin.

Please don't be... Sam.

Her pleas obviously fell on the deaf ears of whomever it was in charge of

answering them. She had thought about Sam for months, and now of all the places, fate chose to thrust her back into Magdalene's orbit... It felt like a cruel joke.

Did she remember her at all? Why did Magdalene so desperately want her to? *Why?* A man's voice enunciating her name finally snapped her from her reverie.

"Any relation to Magdalene Nox?"

From the meager personnel files she'd been provided—most of them sans pictures—Magdalene did know this one. David Uttley. The History Chair. Some awards. Outstanding pedigree. She remembered thinking she understood why Orla Fenway, current—or now former—headmistress of Dragons, had pursued him as much as she did and lured him away from California to the East Coast. He was good at his job.

And as his voice rang clear among the cacophony of others, Magdalene could see why. He commanded attention. Tall, blond, broad shouldered. The All-American, California surfer boy. Perfect in every way. Magdalene disliked him on the spot.

Regardless, his words, delivered in that clear pronunciation, had the effect following the detonation of a bomb. Silence. A terrible, terrifying silence.

Magdalene wanted to laugh. And she knew it wouldn't be in a benevolent way. Rather, it would be bitter, vicious. Her name. Magdalene Nox. All of them had heard of Magdalene Nox. Most people in their line of work knew her by name. Others knew her by reputation. Precious few were blessed with having never heard of her at all.

She didn't blame them for being horrified. Absolutely everyone in their position would be. And how fucking fantastic it was that she was walking in on a staff meeting whilst they were breaking the 'awful' news. Her disgust with the alcohol consumption and unprofessional dishevelment aside, this was perfectly timed.

Standing stock-still in the open doorway, she waited for them to see her. She wasn't opposed to eavesdropping, though surely it would be short-lived. One of them would turn around any moment now. She chose to ignore any thought as to what would happen to her if it were Sam who'd notice her first. Immolation?

Please... Please... Please...

Hadn't she said plenty of that in Manhattan?

But then something in Sam's face changed. She'd been so focused on

Fenway, but now those wondrous eyes, the same ones Magdalene had seen close in ecstasy, suddenly widened with fear. Sam's reaction to hearing her name was to be afraid. Magdalene tasted bile.

Well, *Magdalene Fucking Nox. You got what you wanted.* Fear, horror. Sam knew exactly who she was, knew her reputation. Her lips stretched defiantly. She couldn't show how much Sam's fear affected her, how much it hurt her. The smirk, like the bile, tasted bitter on Magdalene's tongue.

This damned place. These fucking walls. She could never have what she wanted here, anyway. Did she really think she'd be welcomed with wide-open arms? Magdalene didn't know the answer to that question, but she hadn't expected this level of terror from Sam, of all people, and the shock of it hurt.

The dichotomy of their reactions sliced deep. Her heart rolled in her chest, stuttered, and sped up again at the sight of a woman who, in one night, had changed her life. And Sam? Sam, it turned out, was afraid of Magdalene Nox. Well, by the time she was done, Sam would undoubtedly hate her. Just like the rest of these people.

After all, everyone in private education hated Magdalene Nox. It didn't matter that she saved their goddamn schools. It didn't matter that none of them actually closed down, despite having been on the brink.

No, *Magdalene Fucking Nox* salvaged them, and yet she remained the villain. Trimming the budget, firing teachers, consolidating classes, condemning buildings. What did it matter that she was preserving the beating hearts of the cursed places, when people like these despised her for her methods?

She bit the inside of her cheek, copper and honest rage coating her mouth, as the conversation continued to roil around her.

"Wait, didn't she work for Trinity in Connecticut like five years ago? I know she fired half the staff, cut the number of Chairs in half, and..." Magdalene knew this person, too. The picture on file was particularly grandiose. PE teacher. In an outfit thoroughly inappropriate for a school document—just like she was now. Leather pants. And no, it mattered not whether Jen Rovington was or wasn't doing them any kind of justice. Thus, Magdalene felt a thrill that the voice of the woman had broken with something akin to fear.

"She started at Rodante Academy, it's where she made a name for herself. Then went to Trinity before St. Mary's in Boston. Decimated that school. Just tore it to shreds."

Ah, and there she was. To Magdalene's pleasure, Joanne Dorsea had changed very little. She had seen the file and silently rejoiced that the one teacher whose betrayal had truly hurt her years ago, was still at Dragons. The quietly whispered words, Joanne's apprehension palpable, did something thrilling to Magdalene's ego.

Yes, be afraid. I'm back.

"I'm getting confused. Can we all go back to David's question? What's the relationship between this fancy-pants Lord Timothy something-or-other and Magdalene Nox?" Rovington wiped her suddenly pale face and once again reached for the bottle Fenway handed her after she'd poured a generous drop of whiskey into her own coffee.

"He's her husband, he is." Magdalene couldn't quite believe her eyes, but the years had not been kind to Ruth Truffault. Why wasn't she retired? Surely she must be in her 80s? Her squeak had drawn all the attention towards the hearth, where she peeped at them from her cozy recliner and pulled a comforter tighter around herself.

"Magdalene wasn't a Nox when she started," Joanne's voice was quiet, her tone steady, belying the concerned expression on her face. "She married into that family when she was Deputy Headmistress at Rodante Academy. Then she took over that school and, through years of reforming the old institution, came up with her infamous approach. I think she wrote her doctorate thesis about it."

So you kept up with me, didn't you, Ms. Dorsea? A triumphant smile twitched at the corners of Magdalene's lips, but she didn't allow it to spread, desperately trying to not look to Dorsea's right. She couldn't turn her head, she couldn't. She would be swept up by the memories of her body being taken apart...

Please... Please... Please..

"So the husband of the inventor of the Nox Method, the most ruthless reformer of private schools in the US, just became a trustee on our Board? Did I get that right?" Rovington gulped down whatever was left of her brew and poured more whiskey into her cup. Fenway, looking twenty years older than the picture in her file, just nodded and offered the bottle to Dorsea, who accepted with a grim shrug.

Another round of passing the liquor between them compelled Magdalene to finally move her eyes to the right again, only to see Sam still stubbornly shake her head in refusal.

Good girl...

The bottle returned to her, Fenway polished off the remainder of the booze, shaking every last drop into her mug.

“Seems about right, dear.” The way she spoke that last word, grated like nails on a blackboard, saccharine and fake and disgustingly unprofessional. Bile rose in the back of Magdalene’s throat once more at the realization that this motherly display of concern originated from the one woman who’d doomed all these people. A woman who was now playing the martyr.

After taking a long sip of what must have been more alcohol than coffee by now, Fenway made a face. “I honestly don’t know much. I actually met Magdalene Nox some years ago, when the Board was still paying for me to attend all sorts of conferences and represent the school.”

She paused, either for effect or to carefully consider her words. Magdalene suspected the former, since this woman seemed incapable of any kind of careful reasoning—judging by both her track record with the school and by her display this morning. Disheveled, in wrinkled clothes, and drunk, all at 10AM. Magdalene pursed her lips in disgust.

“Well, don’t keep us all on tenterhooks now, Orla!”

Some people, it appeared, couldn’t handle their liquor and were making a spectacle of themselves. Rovington was becoming braver.

“Let’s just say, if we get out of this with no more than having a Nox on the Board and nothing else, we will have dodged a massive bullet. Because if Magdalene Nox follows her husband and somehow sets her sights on Dragons, she will ruin us all, my dears. She will ruin this school and everything we hold dear.”

At Fenway’s words, Sam’s eyes widened further, full of emotion Magdalene wished she could wipe away. The fear was gone. Sheer terror had replaced it. Rage swept over Magdalene. Hot, burning, like gasoline scorching her skin. She’d been hurt just minutes ago by Sam’s reaction to her name, but to see it be manipulated like this by Fenway?

That bitch!

Fenway, incompetent, unprofessional, lacking in both morals and ethics, was lecturing *others* on how they should be terrified of someone they hadn’t even met.

Well, suit yourself.

And like that gasoline, the rage that had burned hot within seconds had its fuel spent, the flames turning into nothing. The small amount of propellant

Magdalene had allowed to feed that fire burning out. She would use it, but she had learned to master herself and channel it. Magdalene focused every ounce of her being on this moment. She'd been told she could be terrifying. Well, if they were all already afraid of her, she would give them something real to be frightened of.

Fenway threw back her mug and choked on the dregs of coffee and whiskey, coughing. Rovington clumsily jumped to her feet to pound her on the back, her intoxicated state plain to see. Magdalene raised an eyebrow at the display and took the first step into the Mess Hall.

The activity was focused on the choking Fenway, and Magdalene was secretly pleased.

Serves you right, you gossiping biddy!

As Dorsea was rummaging through her purse and produced a tissue, Magdalene could see Sam getting a bit lost in all the scrambling and noise around her. Those charcoal eyes turned distant, as if she was uncomfortable with what was going on, just before they took an errant look to the left and... Their gazes met.

Whatever defenses she could muster, whatever protection, whatever shields, Magdalene called on them all—because in that instant, that look, those eyes undid her.

No, Sam was no longer frightened. Even from a distance, Magdalene could see the pupils dilate, almost swallowing the gray. Confusion. Remembrance. Desire.

Well, as it turned out, she had left an impression. And what an indelible one it must have been, because the suddenly pale mouth opened and closed, then she could see Sam's throat work, once, twice, up and down, and Magdalene chose to believe the shiver running up her spine was the thrill of victory. Of anticipation, of what was to come. Not at all lust, the desire to put her lips right there, where they'd left a mark once before, where the aorta fluttered with want and delight.

Later Magdalene would wonder at how overwhelmed her brain must have been, because not for a second did it occur to her how much Sam's presence at Dragons complicated matters. How her private life was suddenly an ace up someone else's sleeve, how she could be ousted, all her plans up in smoke, if this woman chose to twist the truth of their past. Yet, in the heat of the moment, first drowning in the hurt of Sam's fear, then in the anger of Fenway's manipulation and the crowd's hate, Magdalene's mind did not

immediately consider all the ramifications of her newfound complicated—to say the least—situation.

So, overwhelmed as she was, Magdalene took a deep breath, tilted her head to the side, forcing herself to ignore Sam for now and to instead pay close attention to the less-than-dignified scene playing out in front of her. As much as she tried to suppress it, she was aware that the corners of her mouth were curled in a disdainful smirk. It was time to show this pathetic gathering exactly what she thought of what she was witnessing.

Finally, when Fenway's cough was reduced to an occasional wheeze, Magdalene stepped into the light. She had chosen her attire with care this morning, every piece strategically assembled. Her four-inch, red-soled heels the only speck of color aside from her flaming red hair. Her steps rang loud and clear with a clacking noise that penetrated the chaos in an instant.

She could see Sam lick her lips, her mouth clearly dry as Magdalene stopped a few feet away from the table. Drawing up to her full height, she gave herself one more second to stop thinking about those lips, to instead lean into the cold rage in the middle of her chest and, with one last shallow breath, took off her large glasses with a flourish.

It gave her even more satisfaction when absolutely everyone in the room gaped. They all looked flummoxed, ridiculous. The silence was absolute, and it warmed Magdalene from the inside, giving her a little tingle.

Well, Fenway, you wanted them to fear me? They do.

She saw Sam rooted to the spot, the earlier fright gone from her eyes, but so was the lust. Instead, she seemed completely bewitched, unmoving and silent. Magdalene slowly turned away. She didn't need to be sucked into those memories right now. Memories of her fingers that were currently holding her glasses, slipping into Sam, the feeling of silk walls trembling around her, the way that breath would hitch... No, she didn't need this in this particular moment.

Magdalene set her jaw. It was time to get this show on the road. She had heard enough, after all.

“Well, this is cozy, Doctor Fenway. I can see why the school is millions in debt and dead last in all the state and regional classifications. With its faculty gossiping and imbibing second rate alcohol at...”

She paused dramatically and raised her hand to look at her watch, the Vacheron making its satisfyingly expensive sound, and for once she didn't mind the half-a-million dollars weighing down her wrist. “Ah, 10:30 AM.

Isn't drinking on school grounds against the school charter, *my dears?*” She practically spat the last words, mocking the cutesy term-of-endearment Fenway had used just minutes ago.

Yes, let them all know that she'd witnessed every word. Let them understand that she had heard Fenway malign her. Let them realize she had been right there when they talked about her.

When she was absolutely certain all eyes were focused on her, Magdalene took several more steps into the Mess Hall, each sounding like a gunshot. Something round, corpulent, and orange rose from the windowsill and after almost brushing against her—which took all her considerable willpower to not recoil from—disappeared from her sight.

Of course, these incompetent people had allowed critters to live at the school, in the Mess Hall of all places. The sheer number of health department regulations broken by the presence of the pest...

Still, she smiled to herself. She could see by the looks on these people's faces that, given the chance, most of them would have followed the creature.

Magdalene pursed her lips and indulged in her emotions, rage and anger and disgust—from thirty years and those set alight today, by the memories, by the carelessness and cruelty of these people—as they raised their dragons' heads and breathed fire.

Magdalene slowly perused the pale, astonished faces of those around her, then lowered her voice just enough to have their full attention. She knew she probably did not need to. They were hanging on her every word as it was, but they had played with fire, and they should have known better.

“My name is Magdalene Nox. I am the new Headmistress of Three Dragons. And you are all fired.”

OF RUINOUS CHAOS & THINGS HOPED FOR

Well, now Sam certainly knew her name. Magdalene could feel those burning eyes on her, the rage, anger, and after a brief glance, she noted what seemed to be a touch of resentment in them? Which only spurred her own fury in return. Not that she needed to reach very deeply for it. Everything that had happened since she'd set foot on this godforsaken island again had only increased her banking rage.

The gossip, the unqualified comments, the sheer gall to sit there and look righteous, and now this... Resentment, at what? At her not sharing her name? At daring to seek pleasure? Magdalene tossed her hair back and could see Sam's nostrils flare and those long, slim fingers she had admired and daydreamed about curl into fists.

Oh, she remembered those fingers. Magdalene felt a flush rise above her tight collar and decided to attribute it to her still burning-hot anger. The alternative—that it was lust—being unthinkable and in this very moment, embarrassing. Because she'd kept begging for them—and she'd never begged anyone in her life.

She also remembered having been so foolish as to confess to things she had no business confessing, sharing sentiments like, “How can I still be hungry for you when you've sated me so many times?” and reaching out for more, for those hands, for that mouth.

Those words, the ones she so wished to take back, echoed in her mind now as their eyes met across the expanse of the Mess Hall, Sam's full of challenge and her own very much able to withstand it, despite her treacherous heart skipping a beat. Was Sam daring her to say she knew her? That they had an insurmountable conflict of interest? Magdalene raised an eyebrow

more in surprise than anything else.

And then suddenly, Sam did falter. Slowly, the gray gaze lowered, then turned away with a sort of embarrassment Magdalene couldn't place immediately. Yet as she stood there, being watched and now known to everyone, it occurred to Magdalene that the reason Sam might be confused was because of that vaunted Nox poker face. Did she believe Magdalene hadn't recognized her?

The blush, now vibrant on those sharp cheekbones, told its own story, and all Magdalene had to do was listen. The woman was hurt. Hurt by Magdalene not acknowledging her, perhaps thinking she didn't remember her?

Damn.

She was here to do a job. Thirty years she had worked towards this very moment, and this was the absolute last complication Magdalene wanted or needed. A headache had started brewing at her temples, but she'd be damned if she'd raise her hands to try to alleviate it.

She bit the inside of her cheek in an attempt to focus, to center herself, but the taste of copper only brought her back to the tiny hotel room in Manhattan where she'd bitten and sucked and, after having been thoroughly debauched herself, had Sam at her mercy. And Magdalene had been very merciful. Except, now—same as then—the look of vulnerability on those sharp features and in those ashen eyes unraveled her.

A splitting heart on top of a splitting headache? Nox, stop being a cliché!

She *should* just pretend that she didn't recognize her. Because the job was the only thing that was important. Nothing else mattered. And Sam held some cards in this game of theirs. Magdalene took a few seconds to consider the hand they'd both been dealt, and even with her temples pulsing, she discarded most of the issues.

All she needed was plausible deniability. She had that in spades, pun intended. Bases covered, Magdalene sucked on her teeth and narrowed her eyes.

She really should ignore that hurt expression, that tender, bruised look. *She really should...* Against every single fiber of her being, against the thirty years of longing, planning to stand exactly where she stood now, Magdalene's fingers twitched at her side.

All she suddenly wished for was to tuck that stray, blonde, silky flyaway behind the small, sensitive ear and kiss the corner of that jaw, a spot that would tickle and arouse... She could feel arousal, hot and clawing, climbing

up her skin, ready to breach the tight collar of her dress at any moment.

What a mess. And what a mess she was, still, for this woman...

And then, as surprisingly as her heart suddenly losing its goddamn mind over a one-night-stand, the woman in question found not just her courage but also her spite.

“Are we to simply assume you have the power to fire the entire faculty, Mrs. Nox?”

Oh, hell, no...

Sam’s inflection on the address had no doubt been on purpose. Not only was she implying adultery, but she was challenging Magdalene’s authority and her word, all but calling her a liar, in front of the entire faculty.

The faculty... As her anger flared, and between her splitting headache and runaway emotions, with all her thoughts focusing on Sam, Magdalene almost flinched upon being reminded that they were not, in fact, alone.

Dozens of eyes were on them, some filled with fear, some with rabid curiosity, and some with complete resignation. Joanne Dorsea and Ruth Trufault, with their sad, dejected faces, fell into the latter category so easily.

Well, your thirty-year-old chickens have taken very long to roost, but here they are, ladies...

And amid that explosive cocktail of fear and loathing, Sam stood tall, her voice, that melodic low rasp of it still ringing off the stone walls. Was she hoping Magdalene would be afraid? Turn out to be a pretender? Was Sam praying that all this was some sort of farce? To what end?

Clear as day, Reverend Sanderson’s sanctimonious, patronizing sermons rang in Magdalene’s ears, as if the old coot were standing at the front of the Mess Hall.

Have faith, for it is the substance of things hoped for...

Maybe that was what Sam was doing? Betting on her faith and leaping blindly into insults and insinuations? Trying to sabotage her? Since God knows—pun intended—out of this entire crowd, she was the only one who could touch Magdalene, if not by revealing their encounter, then by getting under her skin.

Nonetheless, it would be curious and strangely grounding to put Sam in her place. Because she was taking this massive leap, hoping to land somewhere safe, to hit on something that would save her, save them all. And here was Magdalene, holding the truth and being able to place it just out of reach. A sexy game, an edging of sorts...

Oh, god, she had sex on her brain, and it was all this woman's fault...

The anger returned. Twofold. Both at Sam and at herself for being weak. This place had always had a debilitating sort of power over her. Making her surrender, making her ordinary. Well, it was time to claim some of those things back.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and set her jaw. Raising an eyebrow, she stretched her full lips into a blistering smile.

“It’s Headmistress. Or Magdalene, in a pinch.” Her smile turned into a full-on smirk as she saw Sam’s jaw drop at the obvious reference to the well-known Star Trek captain, who similarly did not brook any doubts about her authority. A captain they’d talked about in the elevator while Magdalene had done all those other things that were so out-of-character. Comforted. Distracted. Shared intimacies.

Well Sam, now you at least know that I do remember you. For better or worse.

Magdalene wanted to laugh as she heard a rather audible gulp, Sam’s color draining from her face in an instant. Why had she thought she could brazenly take on Magdalene? She’d parried Sam’s opening salvo with ease, despite the initial hit scored.

Belatedly, Magdalene realized that Sam may interpret her reply as a taunt over her claustrophobia. Belated, indeed, since she didn’t mean it that way. Merely a flick at remembering her.

Well, what’s done is done...

Setting her curiosity over Sam’s hastiness—or whatever else had prompted this attempt to brave this out—aside, along with her regret at the words she had chosen, Magdalene focused on the job at hand. She’d deal with the rest later. After all, one shot at her victim-du-jour would be enough to set most of these people straight. And they were all standing decidedly so, some quivering, some hiding behind defiance, yet all at attention.

“As for why you should assume anything related to the powers I embody as Headmistress, I imagine this designation, signed by the Board of Trustees, should be enough.”

Magdalene knew her face contorted slightly at the state of the table that held the mess of mugs, the now empty whiskey bottle, and the papers in front of Fenway, but she nonetheless took a pristine document from her briefcase and placed it on top of the pile.

Under Magdalene’s glare, hand shaking visibly, looking twenty years

older than her fifty-five, Orla Fenway reached for the piece of paper effectively removing her from the position she had occupied the last twenty years.

Several long moments later, she placed the document down and, without looking at anyone in particular, nodded. The room erupted. Shouts of, “You can’t!”, “I’ve given my life to this place!”, “What are we going to do now?” filled the Mess Hall.

Magdalene let the voices ring, allowing mayhem to prevail for just a few seconds, letting these people have their outbursts. When she raised her hand, the noise, as always, died down. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Sam’s breath catch, and it gave her a very pleasant little jolt.

Which you will think about later...

“Now that you have had your little tantrums, when you’re ready to discuss matters like adults, preferably sober ones, make arrangements with my secretary to re-apply for your positions. If you interview to my satisfaction, you will have your jobs back. Those who are re-hired may proceed with their vacation plans. Those who are not, or decide that interviewing is not something they want to attempt, may vacate the premises and surrender the keys to their accommodations to the custodial staff.”

Magdalene’s arched eyebrow dared anyone to contradict her. But Sam was the only one who’d had the courage, or maybe the foolhardiness, to speak directly to her so far.

“Now, Doctor Fenway, if you would accompany me to my new office. I believe there are some things we need to discuss before the trustees arrive on the island with the twelve o’clock ferry.”

SHE KNEW the way to the Headmistress’ office like the back of her hand. Magdalene might have forgotten many things, but not these corridors. And they had remained exactly the same. Even the boards that had creaked back in her days of running amok on these oaken floors. It was as if time had stopped among these godforsaken walls. A lifetime had passed, and she knew every nook and cranny still.

She didn’t need Fenway to show her the way. But neither was she ready to give away that she had been a student here herself. No doubt Joanne and

Ruth—if they actually remembered her—would reveal that little nugget soon enough. Plus, making Orla chase her had a purpose. Perhaps a nefarious one, but a purpose nonetheless. Showing this gossipmonger who the new boss is was worth listening to Fenway huff and puff beside her.

It gave Magdalene a dark frisson of pleasure. A miniscule one, granted, but it gratified her nonetheless that she could pay this woman back a little, a tiny sliver, for her earlier vitriol.

Enjoying the clacking of her heels on the alternating wooden and marble floors, she sped up a bit, lengthening her stride for the sake of being a touch mean.

A few turns and another floor later, Fenway finally stopped and doubled over, dropping her hands to her thighs, breathing hard.

Magdalene halted too, a couple of steps away, watching the older woman breathe and groan. She hoped her face gave away nothing, but her tether was getting shorter by the minute.

“Running is a bit different from running one’s mouth, isn’t it, Doctor Fenway?” Magdalene lowered her voice and sneered with enough contempt to make her intentions abundantly clear. She would not tolerate insubordination and gossip.

There was another groan, one Fenway didn’t bother trying to disguise, and then a pair of tired, red-rimmed, blue eyes peeked at Magdalene from under matted hair.

“If you don’t want to hear people badmouthing you, you shouldn’t hide and listen through doors.”

Magdalene pursed her lips. Some people didn’t know when to stop digging their own grave. Who was she to prevent them?

“I wasn’t. The doors were open. I have ears. I stood there for over ten minutes, in plain view—not that anyone cared enough to turn—waiting for someone to notice me, or for an opportune moment for me to finally break through the onslaught of gossip and be able to interrupt you.”

“Now you’re just splitting hairs, Nox. But...” Fenway’s voice faltered slightly. “I do apologize. I have no idea who you are outside of the rumors and newspaper articles about you. And you do have a reputation.”

“Ah, the perfect non-apology apology. *‘I lied viciously about you, but it’s your own fault.’* Spare me, Doctor Fenway. Now if you could show me to the Headmistress’ office and start packing?”

“Look, Nox—”

Yeah, okay.

Fenway really didn't know when to let go of that shovel and seemed to think she still had some kind of power around here.

Well, so be it then.

“No, you look. I have been on the premises for less than half an hour, and you have already started disparaging my character, insinuating that I got this job because of my connections, rallying the faculty against me sight unseen. Have I missed anything? Now, my office? Preferably sometime before the trustees arrive?”

She realized both her voice and face were be cold enough to snap a bone. Any other time, with any other person, Magdalene might have been kinder. After all, the woman had just been forced to relinquish her life's work, according to Magdalene's sources.

Moreover, one did catch more flies with honey. But the realization that, yet again, she was a pariah in this building, an 'other' to be combated, to protect the school from, to ultimately be cast out, cut her deeper.

Magdalene was also aware that she was giving Fenway and her cronies too much power. Their opinion shouldn't matter. What they thought of her, what they did. She'd fired the lot of them, after all. A stray thought about wounded, burning gray eyes intruded, and she hastily shoved it aside. Sam was a regret for later.

Finally, Magdalene's words seemed to snap Fenway out of her stupor, and she appeared to gather enough stamina, and perhaps dignity, to lead her down the hallway in the direction of the Headmistress' office.

Magdalene wasn't sure exactly what she'd expected to find when they arrived, but the macrame-infested, stale-food-smelling disaster more reminiscent of a hoarder's den than an actual space in an educational institution was not it.

She desperately tried not to touch anything, nor to lean on anything, even as her shoes squelched on the floor when she walked on what looked like spilled coffee. Obviously with enough sugar in it to have insects and Louboutins alike stick to it.

Chaos reigned everywhere. Chaos and rot. And wasn't that emblematic of the place?

Belatedly, she realized she was being spoken to, but as she slowly positioned herself behind the cluttered desk—there were seven dirty mugs and what looked like a half-eaten donut—she finally allowed her eyes to

wander back to Fenway.

The woman who'd had a rather ruddy color as they'd sprinted through the corridors was now a distinct shade of fuchsia. She glared at Magdalene, either unperturbed by the mess, or defiant.

"You think you know everything? Well, this school will prove you wrong. You know nothing, thinking you are so superior to all of us. I know what you're doing, Nox."

Magdalene felt the distinct urge to open a window. The smell was making her queasy. And whatever Fenway had been imbibing earlier clearly had gone to her head.

"What am I doing? Well, I'm trying not to gag, Doctor Fenway. And I'm also trying to figure out whether I will have any money in the already stretched budget to hire a crew to shovel out this mess."

"I will lodge a protest against this overreach! This is preposterous!"

Fenway stepped closer, and Magdalene could actually smell the whiskey on her breath.

"You're not sober, Doctor Fenway, and you're making this dismissal harder than it should be." She gritted her teeth and waited for an imminent explosion.

"I have no idea what gives you the right to throw me out like this! I want to speak with the trustees!"

Magdalene was about to finally cast civility aside and show the former headmistress the door, when it flew open and revealed a flushed Sam standing there like a sentinel. As if she had been lurking behind it and only walked in when the situation got dire. She probably was trying to defend Fenway from her clutches. Sam's apparent loyalty to the former headmistress rankled. So Magdalene rolled her eyes and bit back a sigh.

"I see that chaos reigns not just in the spaces you occupy, Doctor Fenway, but also amongst your staff. Do they practice simply walking in without knocking? Are manners too much to ask for in this place?"

Fenway actually growled and took a step towards Magdalene when Sam adroitly stepped between them.

"I apologize for the intrusion. And for not knocking. I assumed that, in the ongoing ruckus, neither of you would hear me." Magdalene tried not to smile at the attempt at diplomacy, because even though the tone was very much pacifying and Sam extended soothing hands towards Fenway, the older woman shrugged them away.

“Ah, Sammy, are you here to save me then? I assume Joanne sent you? How gracious of you all to look after your old headmistress.” Fenway’s laughter was harsh, brittle, and it grated on Magdalene’s nerve endings. But it was the sudden shrinking in Sam that caused her to pay closer attention to the scene unfolding in front of her.

Sam’s voice was still calming, maybe even a little beseeching, and it was that note of supplication Magdalene recognized very well. It was the same one she herself had employed as a little girl trying to steer her wayward mother away from trouble and embarrassment. Her heart gave a painful thump of *déjà vu*.

“I just thought that, since it has been announced that the trustees will be here soon, instead of tomorrow as we were informed earlier, you’d like to gather the paperwork and all the necessary documentation to prepare for that meeting? I can help Headmistress Nox in the meantime with whatever she requires.”

“Headmistress Nox? I see how it is, Sammy. Burying me already?”

The nickname, the tone and the sheer, all-consuming hatred in those words landed on Sam like a physical blow. Magdalene could swear the reverberations were like aftershocks that reached her as well. That thump from earlier turned into an ache she knew all too well. An understanding that only survivors of such relationships had for one another, but also sympathy. Assuming Sam would probably not appreciate the pity, Magdalene tried to remain impassive.

“No, Orla, you’ve had a long night and might need—” Sam didn’t have the opportunity to finish her sentence as Orla pushed past her and out the door.

“Save it. I will see you at noon, Nox.”

Magdalene looked on as the hurt settled in Sam’s eyes, in the drooping of her shoulders, in the way her chest seemed to cave in around itself as she wrapped her lanky arms around it.

She sucked in a breath, and as her heart went out to her, Magdalene had to revert back to sarcasm. As shields went, it wasn’t very efficient, but at the moment, it was all she had.

“The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

“So I’m learning.” Sam turned slowly, finally facing Magdalene fully, and it felt like another damned *déjà vu*. Only that time, they’d been standing in front of each other in the bar, moments before making that fateful decision

to go up to Sam's room.

The sun streaming in from the windows behind Magdalene was teasing the blonder streaks in Sam's disheveled hair, the messy braid making Magdalene want to untangle it, to run her fingers through it. She wanted... *Dammit*, she wanted. She clenched her jaw. It was supremely inconvenient to find that desire here, of all places. And of all times.

But then Dragons seemed to be the place of wants that could never be. Distantly, Magdalene wondered if this was some sort of punishment, to always be given just a tiny sip of water before the glass was yanked away. Dragons, this woman, who even now—with that earnest, honest face, those bruised eyes, and the thoughts and memories of their night together written all over her face, stripped of all her defenses in her worn flannel shirt and old Converse—was so very appealing. That tall drink of water, all puns and metaphors intended.

But just like in the elevator in Manhattan, it was that pain, that hurt, and the unstoppable desire to soothe and to comfort that made Magdalene take a step forward, only to be interrupted by the creaking of the door. Something of an indeterminate orange color strolled in like it owned the room and unceremoniously made its way to a rather worn-out pillow on the windowsill.

Was this the creature from the Mess Hall? A cat? Magdalene wanted to recoil.

“Who in the world let this mongrel in?” She knew her voice sounded both affronted and scandalized, but she couldn't help herself. She did not like cats.

“Ah, nobody really. He lives here.” Sam's arms dropped, something tugging at the corners of her mouth. She was clearly trying not to burst into laughter as the cat, completely oblivious to Magdalene's impending wrath, stretched to his full, impressive length and promptly fell asleep on his back, all four paws in the air.

“This is Willoughby the Third, the Academy's mascot, I guess you could call him. An animal—a dog, a cat, or a horse—has been at the school since its very inception. In a nod to the Downing Street cat, this one holds the job title of the Mouser in Chief.”

Magdalene gave a derisive head shake. “From his bulk, he is either exceptionally good at it, or exceptionally bad at it. And from the state of the school and the accounting reports on the hiring of exterminators three times

just in the past two years, should I assume it's the latter?"

And suddenly, Sam's smile blossomed fully.

"Willoughby is an unconventional employee. But you can literally set your watch by him. Depending on which pillow he chooses to sleep on during the course of the day, you can tell what time it is."

Magdalene snorted, the sound catching even her by surprise, and Sam's eyes widened, almost agog.

"I assume he faithfully follows the warmest sunspots? Cats don't belong inside. And Three Dragons doesn't have a barn." As she strode closer to the sleeping animal, she could sense Sam tense nearby.

"With all due respect, Headmistress, he is not a barn cat. He's one of us."

Headmistress...

The word, rolling off Sam's tongue once again with ease and precision, made Magdalene want to hold on to it. To embrace it.

Only the word, mind you. Not Sam... Not Sam at all.

Magdalene gave a curt nod to her own thoughts.

"Well, since you are showing me the courtesy of using my official title, it will be under my purview to decide what will happen with the Mouser in Chief of Three Dragons."

Sam had just opened her mouth, undoubtedly to argue further, when the door was thrown open yet again, now with more force, and a gangly, disheveled teenager almost pushed past Sam to get at Magdalene. She might have succeeded, too, if Sam's reaction had been less swift.

For the second time today, Sam put her body between Magdalene and some perceived danger.

She would have to think about it later...

"I don't know who you think you are, but you can't fire the teachers! Not without hearing the students out! We have the right to be heard and they have the right to a fair trial!"

Magdalene raised an eyebrow, deciding to take her cues for dealing with this situation from Sam, whose face showed nothing but consternation, while gently holding on to the girl. The clock ticked once, twice, three, four, five... Time was doing the work of quieting the spirits for her. Still, the intrusion had been rude.

"And who might you be?" She infused her words with a rather dismissive tone, but she allowed for it to hold a curious note. There was no need to discourage the child entirely, since it was clear that someone—perhaps

Fenway herself—had not only sent the girl on a mission but also misinformed her.

“I’m Lily Easterly and I’m here to tell you that there are no better teachers in the whole world than Professor Threadneedle or Professor Dorsea or Doctor Fenway!”

“Lily...” Magdalene almost shook her head as Sam’s admonishment fell on deaf ears while the girl struggled in her grip.

She wanted to sigh. She was familiar with the issue Lily Easterly and several other girls represented at Dragons. Scholarship kids. Scholarships that were not enshrined in the school’s Charter and thus extremely vulnerable to the whims of every new headmistress or board. Yet someone had ruined this child’s chance to make a good impression on her. Whomever sent her must have lost their collective minds.

Magdalene suppressed yet another sigh. The girl was being used, a pawn, and Magdalene hated the very thought.

The Vacheron weighed heavily on her wrist, and the memories it brought with it—memories of being used this same way—compelled her to attempt to appease, at least for now. Hell if she knew what she’d do about any of this in the long run. Didn’t she want to take this place apart, brick by brick? Didn’t she want to burn it all down? Why this need to wipe away the hurt from both the brown and the gray eyes?

Focus!

“Well, Ms. Easterly, to your earlier questions, I am Headmistress Nox, and I can do pretty much whatever I want under the Charter that governs the Academy’s functioning. As of a minute ago, I failed to see why anyone at Three Dragons would require a trial to begin with.” She looked Lily right in the eye and then winked. Lily goggled and Magdalene continued. “Are they delinquents? Usually, some sort of criminal activity is required for judicial proceedings.”

Her joke landed well, predictably. Sam’s lips twitched despite the seriousness of the situation. Her calm demeanor had obviously taken the wind out of Lily’s sails, and she sagged in Sam’s arms in what looked like genuine relief.

Then the girl’s face turned bright red, clearly realizing that she needed to reply.

“No, ma’am. I’m sorry, I just heard that you fired everyone and that you will be discontinuing the scholarships and cutting all the funding, and turning

Dragons into a religious school again and... But you have to know that everyone here, all the students, we can vouch that there are no better teachers —”

“Yes, you said, Ms. Easterly. ‘In the whole world,’ was it?” Well, the kid was smart, but this was getting slightly too sentimental. Magdalene narrowed her eyes.

She shouldn’t be speaking at all. Nor should she be giving anyone any reassurances. The situation of the scholarship girls was causing her extreme concern. Whether she decided to close the school, downsize it, or simply follow the instructions from the Trustees to terminate the program they were funded under, her options were limited.

Magdalene had read letters from the few parents who were up in arms about these students. Granted, the bigotry spelled out in them, the righteous indignation that had nothing to do with righteousness at all, grated on her. But she had a job to do.

The silence hung above them longer than was comfortable, but it still accomplished what it always did, making her quarry uncomfortable.

Lily was the first one to lose her cool.

“Ma’am?”

“Yes, Ms. Easterly?” Magdalene again schooled her voice to be devoid of all emotion or inflection.

“Did you really send absolutely everyone at school packing?” Lily hiccuped a sob, and Magdalene saw the rest of the fight drain out of the small, bony shoulders as they sagged further.

Dammit, these people, this place...

“Never believe rumors, Ms. Easterly. I told everyone that, in the coming days, I will be interviewing the teachers to ascertain their suitability for a place at Dragons. I think you will find that I meant it. You and the rest of the scholarship girls will have a chance to discuss your situation before any decision is made regarding the existing arrangements.”

Lily perked up, although Magdalene regretted encouraging her so prematurely, and extracted herself from Sam’s hold and, with hastily murmured thanks and embarrassed goodbyes, made her way out of the office.

Well, that was over.

“It’s not fair, you know.”

Magdalene wanted to flinch. She wanted to ball up her hands and shake

them at the Almighty, if she only believed in such a deity.

Sam. So damn naïve.

“Fairness is a nonexistent concept. I assume you don’t think it’s fair that I interview the scholarship students while everybody else will be allowed to arrive back in two months without having their presence here questioned, because their parents have the money to pay for it?”

“Yeah... That.” Sam faltered, obviously stumped by the bluntness of the retort. Magdalene couldn’t help a little taunt.

“Eloquence itself, I see. Scholarships are always a very touchy subject at any private school. I imagine, given the circumstances, they will be a similarly sensitive issue here at Dragons. You know the Academy’s Charter does not provide for any kind of student funding from outside of the school? And the current scholarship arrangement is exploring a loophole where funding is taken directly from the endowment, hence not considered technically an outside source. It’s not exactly within the scope of the charter.”

“It should be, though. *Love one another, help one another*—aren’t these oh-so-Christian beliefs?” Sam’s counter would be considered blasphemous inside these hallowed halls at best and insubordinate at worst. And while Magdalene did not give a damn about the former, and reveled in the fact that Sam was turning out to be very much a like-minded soul on the subject of Christianity, the latter was something she refused to deal with at this moment.

“Be that as it may.”

Magdalene moved closer to the massive window overlooking the quad, the familiar sight unexpectedly soothing. As unexpectedly as Sam’s presence. When had she unclenched her jaw? Nonetheless, she had some questions she needed the answers to. She might as well get to them.

“It occurred to me that, for someone so eager to introduce herself on another occasion, Sam, you are remarkably taciturn on this particular subject, now that my knowing your name is infinitely more important. There is no Sam on the list of faculty at Three Dragons.”

She turned to fully face Sam, who was intently staring at her beaten up Converses. Was she suddenly shy? She certainly hadn’t been about confronting and challenging Magdalene earlier.

“There is, or at least there was, before you fired everyone, a Samantha Threadneedle on that faculty list.”

Magdalene chose not to take the bait. Instead, she simply tilted her head

to the side and continued to observe.

She remembered that teacher's file. Accolades, accomplishments, single-handedly lending the school credibility. Yet once a charity case, since there was no other way to explain her presence at the school when she'd been a student. The first scholarship child was standing right in front of her, all grown up.

"Samantha... Lovely name." Sam's eyes went wide as saucers and Magdalene wanted to smirk. It was good to feel at least a tiny bit in control and not allow this infuriating woman to get under her skin like this.

Yet when Sam finally controlled her blush and found her voice, Magdalene was the one left sucker-punched.

"Is this your version of Miranda Priestly, where you call me by my full name now, in a show of how special I am or how different you are in contrast to the rest of us here, Headmistress? First of all, I'm not sure you could pull off a Miranda Priestly, and second, allow me to inform you that, despite what you might think, and despite whichever version of my name you might prefer, it is my name, after all, and I prefer Sam."

Sam blinked, then her mouth went slack. It was clear she hadn't expected Magdalene's outright laughter as a reaction to her pronouncement. But it was either laugh at her or kiss that serious mouth senseless. Exasperating. Infuriating. Utterly naïve, yet so damn irresistible.

"Touché, Sam it is then." And under her eyes, Sam's smile turned soft, shy. Magdalene hurried past this moment, lest she say something absolutely unsuitable like, 'how cute you are when your dimples are showing'.

"Also, you mentioned being fired. Indeed, but if I were you, Ms. Threadneedle, I wouldn't be as concerned about your position."

"Why? Because you slept with me?" It was like a strike in the solar plexus, and in the haze of her own shock, Magdalene saw Sam's hand fly up to her mouth, obviously stunned at the words she'd been so bold, so careless to blurt out. Further proof that the woman was intelligent, attractive, combative, and reckless. And occasionally too honest for her own good.

"My, my, you just can't seem to help yourself, can you?" Magdalene looked her dead in the eye, and Sam slowly lowered hers in what appeared like an apology. Well, maybe Magdalene could be magnanimous this once and disregard the potential for her own ruination. If word got out that she had this massive conflict of interest at Dragons, all her plans would go up in smoke.

“And to answer your question, no, not for... that reason.” She stumbled over the words. And she really didn’t know how to refer to what had happened between them. It was a one-night stand, but the syntagm seemed to cheapen it. Magdalene shook her head and bit the inside of her cheek. She really needed to rid herself of these thoughts.

“The answer to your questions is because there are no circumstances under which I would not rehire the New England Teacher of the Year and recipient of the Governor’s Honors this past school year. Which is commendable for someone of your relatively tender age. Brava, Miss Threadneedle. Though why so camera-shy? None of the awards or articles were accompanied by your picture...”

The color popped back into those sharp cheekbones, like streaks of shame. Magdalene narrowed her eyes. She knew what it felt like to be singled out, for the positive and for the negative. And when one sought anonymity, being chosen—for anything—felt like reproach. Like a burden. And so she lowered her voice, gentled it, an olive branch to smooth the uncomfortable position she had put Sam in.

“I may be a newcomer, Ms. Threadneedle, but I never come into a new situation unprepared. With your former headmistress unequipped, and her deputy obviously unable to insert herself into this situation, I trust you will find it within yourself to help me with the transition?”

Sam visibly gulped and nodded. As her chin dropped to her chest again, Magdalene decided it was safe enough, or maybe worth the risk to murmur, “And you and I both know I could pull off a Miranda Priestly just fine.”

When Sam’s head popped up, eyes wide in astonishment—and dare Magdalene say it, hunger?—it became blatantly obvious that they both knew they were in trouble.

OF DEMARCATION LINES & UNDETERRED CRITTERS

It felt like drawing lines. Ones of demarcation of a front. Sam's army was on this side and hers on the other, and every time those lines moved, there was a bloodbath. If she was hoping for an armistice, Magdalene realized she was very much wrong. As soon as Sam had recovered from Magdalene's Miranda Priestly revelation, she changed the subject.

"You told Lily that everyone will interview. But you're already making an exception for me?"

Was it temper? Insolence? Or one of the worst cases of foot-in-mouth disease Magdalene had ever witnessed? Did Sam merely like antagonizing people who held her fate in their hands? Or did Magdalene have this singular privilege?

Whatever it was, she had a feeling Sam simply couldn't help herself. The alternation of shy, bashful Sam to brave, brash Sam was a sight to behold.

Magdalene wanted to sigh. Deeply. She had been back on the damn island for an hour, and she was already so tired.

"You will have your interview, Ms. Threadneedle. Be at ease, I'm not showing any favoritism by saying that I will still rehire you. I bring a lot to the table, and I also recognize that you do, too. I can be as prepared as humanly possible, and believe me, I am, but reading reports and scorecards is one thing. Having been at the school for your entire life is something entirely different."

Magdalene noted the flinch, but didn't rejoice at scoring the hit. She pursed her lips. Clearly, she was getting sentimental, even if her words still scorched.

"Your awards aside, your history with the school, the obvious acceptance

of your leadership among faculty and student body alike—as displayed both by you having been sent here by your inept peers and the staunch defense of you by your pupil—makes you a suitable candidate to spearhead the transition and help me make it as quick as possible.”

Predictably, her last comment got Sam’s hackles up.

“Quick, not smooth?”

Magdalene allowed her lethal smile to bloom.

“You will discover, Ms. Threadneedle, that I have no interest in *smooth*. I do not care whose feathers I ruffle. The school is drowning in debt, mismanagement, and neglect. *Smooth* is not going to cut it to set it back on its course. *Smooth* is not what is needed to save it. Are you aware that, in the past five years, Dragons has operated exclusively in the red?”

At Sam’s dumbfounded expression, Magdalene turned towards the window, her brows furrowing at the sight of the tomcat still lounging on his pillow, stretched to his full, impressive length now, paws twitching in his sleep. She wondered if he’d chosen the most impudent position possible to bask in the sun, solely to prove a point. Then she scoffed at herself for ascribing intent to a mangy animal. *Ridiculous*. Under her dirty stare, he stretched further, and was that a snore? Magdalene curled her lip in disgust.

“The state of the endowment is such that the school will simply not survive even one more year under similar leadership, which has propelled it towards nothing but financial ruin. As it stands right now, the finances are depleted. But of course, let me use my time to coddle Fenway and spare her feelings. Is that what you’d want me to do? Or would you, perchance, prefer that I use my time to try to save the school she’s been so busy destroying during her tenure?”

Sam gasped, and Magdalene turned to face her full-on.

“I don’t do nice, Ms. Threadneedle. I don’t do doting or coddling. I do my job and hope it will be enough to first save Dragons, and then to perhaps restore it to its glory.”

The words were out of her mouth before she could articulate her position better. Was she lying? To what end? To make herself look better? She knew she had not yet made any decision one way or another whether she’d save this rotting heap or light up a match, so why couldn’t she just admit that? Magdalene took a careful breath and glanced discreetly at her watch. She needed time. To think. To make decisions. To simply be the Headmistress.

In front of her, Sam faltered and shifted from foot to foot. Something

beyond just Magdalene's words had discombobulated her.

"Ah, I wasn't aware things were as dire." Obviously, bravado was what had gotten Sam through this conversation so far, and now that she was on the back foot and had heard some hard-hitting truths, she was retreating. On another day and with another person, Magdalene would congratulate herself on another win, but not today and not with Sam, who suddenly confounded her once more. "And you were very nice to me when you didn't need to be."

Magdalene almost choked on air. There was no way Sam was referring to...

"I sure hope you mean the elevator and not... afterward." It was Magdalene's turn to stumble over her words—again—and Sam finally smiled, the gesture filled with warmth instead of mockery.

"Yes, ah, the elevator. Sure. That."

The words, the slight confusion in them, and the smile prompted Magdalene to answer in kind.

"Still tongue-tied, Ms. Threadneedle? I know a little something about panic attacks. I couldn't leave you to it, even for self-preservation's sake." She was aware her words were bitchy to the extreme, but she'd infused them with enough warmth to make Sam blush.

Before either of them could say anything, the door opened without a knock yet again. Magdalene could see Sam brace herself to stand between her and whomever else was coming in here to shout their disgruntlement. This was becoming a habit.

When George's shrill voice pronounced, "Am I interrupting then, Headmistress?" before zeroing on Sam with a distinctly curious gleam in her light blue eyes, Magdalene wanted to gnash her teeth. "I'm Georgette Leroy, and who might you be, cutie?"

In classic George fashion, she waved away Magdalene's hissed "George" and extended her hand to Sam, who blinked, looking shell-shocked.

"Sam Threadneedle, ma'am."

"Oh, beautiful manners aside, none of this ma'am stuff. This one," she winked in Magdalene's direction, "might require such ceremony to soothe her dark soul, but I feel fine being called George, sweetheart."

Magdalene closed her eyes and counted to five without much effect as her second utterance of "George," only drew a rueful chuckle.

"I'm ten years her senior and can get away saying things like that. Plus, I've been her secretary for oh, let's see, never mind, an ungodly number of

years, ever since she became Chair at Rodante. Such a wee, lovely lass she was back then. Are you the welcome committee then, cutie?”

Magdalene scoffed and motioned with her hand, and George finally fell silent. They’d known each other long enough for George to recognize her exasperation.

“Now that there is some quiet and less insolence in here... Ms. Threadneedle, Ms. Leroy is indeed my secretary, and will be replacing former Headmistress Fenway’s staff.”

“You’re firing Roger, sight unseen?”

Sam’s outburst would have held more weight if Magdalene hadn’t seen the absolute disaster the former secretary’s desk was. Littered with dirty dishes, it emanated a distinct smell of stale food.

When their eyes finally met after Sam had perused the desk in the front office with a rather sheepish expression on her face, Magdalene raised an eyebrow. When Sam bit her lip, Magdalene managed to suppress a triumphant smirk. But it was a close call.

“Yeah, I guess some things do need an overhaul,” Sam admitted.

“Well, I’m glad you approve, Ms. Threadneedle.”

The long look George gave Sam before winking at her did not escape Magdalene. Dismissing the perhaps too perspicacious George and Sam—who couldn’t seem to get her loyalties and priorities into any semblance of order to save her life—Magdalene proceeded to peruse the messy desk in front of her. It was not particularly different from the hoarders’ paradise in the front office.

A half-eaten donut caught her attention as she gingerly lifted some of the files with the very tips of her fingers, and she almost gagged. Lying right there on a piece of paper clearly marked ‘URGENT’ and seeping grease all over it, the pastry embodied everything that was wrong with the school, with Orla Fenway, with the careless, almost criminal way she’d been allowed to misuse and ruin this place.

On cue, as if sensing that her disgust could be made even more acute, the ginger creature raised from its slumber and zeroed in on the treat in front of them. As it coiled, muscles taut to make the leap from the windowsill to the desk, Magdalene narrowed her eyes. The cat froze, sat back on its haunches, and tilted its head. Their gazes met, and bi-colored eyes, eerily like her own, focused on her with a patient yet decidedly questioning look, as if seeking permission.

She stared back at it. Why was she even entertaining feeding this mangy beast? Suddenly, the cat emitted a rather pitiful, scratchy meow. Yes, definitely asking permission. Well, then... She gave the creature one more glare before she raised the file that was half obscuring the donut a little higher and nodded, though still unable to hide the disgust she felt for the spectacle unfolding in front of her.

One leap and a thud later, the cat proceeded to loudly chew on the disgusting prize. There was no indication that it minded its condition.

Magdalene shuddered and turned to Sam, whose face was bright red as she shook with obvious embarrassment, then to George, who appeared positively giddy with mirth, hiding her snicker behind a cough.

Sympathy warred with a little schadenfreude in Magdalene. She knew Sam did not want her pity, but the unraveling of the depth of the school's despair and misery were clearly hurting her. Yet, Magdalene had been telling her as much, and this final act of discovery of just how disgusting the mess was, should be her coup de grâce.

"Now that we've dispensed with small talk and disgusting pastry, George, you're here, does that mean that those troglodytes are here as well?"

"If by troglodytes you mean the trustees, you would be right. All nine arrived with me on the ferry. Sorry to tell you, though, they are all sorts of disgruntled and disheveled. The waters were a bit choppy." For once, George's glee made Magdalene cringe. In fact, here in front of Sam, who was cautiously eyeing them both, it grated. And George played up to the obvious attention by leaning into Sam with a conspiratorial gleam in her eyes.

"This one's ex-husband is among the crowd. Good times ahoy, matey."

"George!" Her own raised voice, something she so rarely employed, sounded sharp and shocked even her. Sam's discomfort with the tension was palpable, but her shoulders also sagged as if in relief, and Magdalene bit her lip. Well, thankfully there went Sam's misplaced idea about having had an affair with an adulterer.

To Magdalene's relief, George raised both hands, soothing some of her frayed nerves. When she spoke again, her tone was suitably chagrined.

"Apologies, Madam Headmistress. I believe there was talk of assembling in the Mess Hall and waiting for the faculty to gather as well. I'll join you in a jiffy as soon as I find the restroom in this labyrinth." Sam pointed to a door outside the office. "The Headmistress' personal facilities are right there on the left. I mean, ah, if Headmistress Nox doesn't mind you using them..."

Magdalene waved a dismissive hand at both of them and shook her head. With a suspicious glance at the cat—who'd been sitting on its back haunches, observing them as if it understood and was ready to chime in with a smart remark at any moment—Magdalene made to leave the office. But after being jerked around by everyone all morning, she really wanted to have the last word. And Sam was such an easy, delicious target.

With a half-turn, Magdalene narrowed her eyes at her. "I assume you still want to be part of the faculty, Ms. Threadneedle? Then I advise you to join the rest of that rag-tag bunch in the Mess Hall, and not at your convenience, but preferably immediately." Out of the corner of her eye, Sam's expression told her exactly how susceptible her target had been to Magdalene's little game.

Good. Mission accomplished...

IT WAS ONLY 10 PM, yet she felt like she'd been awake for 72 hours straight. The early morning arrival, the subsequent upheaval, and the ensuing chaos, as well as the absolutely useless and farcical assembly—where Joel Tullinger fancied he was channeling a great orator and leader only to sound like an amateur—had worn her down.

Magdalene made her way up the stairs and down the corridor reserved for the faculty quarters. Earlier, Timothy had tried to insinuate himself into her plans, and entertaining him was the reason she was as late to retire for the night as she was. She still wasn't sure if he'd be a pain or an asset. In Timothy's customary fashion, he was probably both.

She sighed and was about to insert the key into the lock of the last door in the hallway, when it opened inwardly with enough force to make her jump.

"You're here!" At George's singsong, she narrowed her eyes, and the pulsing pain behind them that she had tried to keep at bay all day returned with a vengeance.

"I am." Magdalene crossed the threshold and allowed the door to swing shut. With the click of the lock, the rather spacious studio felt smaller.

George stood in the middle of it, wringing her hands in obvious anticipation. Magdalene was tempted to roll her eyes, but realized it would only serve to aggravate her headache, so she settled on a half smile and

finally looked around.

Her bags had been brought in and carefully placed by the large closet. The bed was made, and it appeared the small kitchenette was stocked. Her secretary had outdone herself. Magdalene allowed her smile to stretch a bit more and nodded.

“Thank you, George.”

George laughed, hugging the praise to her chest before sobering.

“I still don’t understand why you didn’t throw Fenway out of the headmistress’ cottage. It is rightfully yours.”

Ah, so George was here to gossip then. Magdalene rubbed her neck. She needed a drink and maybe sleep, but she realized her secretary would not be pacified without hearing something tasty.

Before she even turned her head towards the kitchenette, George was already pouring the whiskey. Magdalene’s weary shoulders drooped. So this wasn’t going to be a short chat.

“A screaming match wouldn’t have served my interests.” Their fingers touched as George passed the tumbler, both glass and skin cold.

“She thinks she’s in charge.” Her secretary’s voice was suddenly slightly hoarse, but as Magdalene raised an inquisitive eyebrow at her, George waved the silent question away. “Went down the wrong pipe, that’s all.”

Magdalene blinked a few times, her eyes dry and scratchy, only intensifying the headache.

“Alright then.” George seemed peculiar, but she did not have the energy to deal with her friend’s oddities tonight. “Fenway will most probably have to go either way. The more I dig into the records, the more I am convinced of her incompetence as headmistress. But she is a popular figurehead. I am reluctant to cause a stir right off the bat.”

George’s laughter, sudden and loud, startled her.

“Cause a stir? Maggie, I hear you are way past that and well into full on hurricane-mode. Firing everyone? The sanctimonious assembly speech by Joel? Timothy all but drooling all over you in public? I think these little people have no idea what hit them!”

Magdalene shook her head and took another sip from her glass, now warm from her own palms, soothing her chill.

“They needed a kick in the teeth, and most of them will be rehired, anyway. No way can I find replacements within two months. Honestly, should I even bother with the way things are going? This place may be razed

off the face of the Earth and from the Massachusetts registry of functioning schools by then.”

Magdalene drummed her fingers on the countertop. The thought was suddenly sobering. Too sobering, and she pushed it aside. “And who would agree to live and work on this godforsaken piece of rock? But even you can’t ignore how desperately the school needs a shake up. In debt, morale beyond the pale, behavior absolutely unbecoming anyone resembling an educator...”

She kept taking small sips of her drink. There was no use in getting heated. And why was she even concerned? The fact that the state of affairs she’d encountered at Dragons actually impacted her at all was ludicrous.

Everything, from the cracks in the walls, the sagging roof, the mice... God, the mice... She half expected to have to deal with one this very night, her imagination surely playing tricks on her, or were those real scratching noises somewhere in the corner of the studio?

“You were saying?” George’s question interrupted her musings, and she realized she was doing it again. Spacing out. If it wasn’t Sam, it was this damn school. She needed to shake both loose and just do her job. Magdalene had been in a ‘I will deal with all these thoughts and emotions later’ mood all day, pushing aside her feelings and intrusive ruminations. Well, maybe she did not need to deal with any of them at all. The school should at least get her best effort, even if she did not yet know to what end.

“The place is a mess. And Joel and his brand of pontificating don’t help me at all. He thinks he can play Good Shepherd or whatever saintly garbage he is full of. I do not take my orders from him, even if I have to placate him for a while.”

And honestly, he was so damn adamant that the school was evil and unworthy of existence, Magdalene was tempted to save this godforsaken place just to spite him. After all, there was nothing wrong with spite. People have used it as a motivator for millennia. Magdalene herself was no exception.

“Alden is the man to watch out for?” George was hanging on her every word, and Magdalene caught herself.

“One of them, yes.” She carefully placed her tumbler on the counter before fully turning towards George. But as she opened her mouth to wish her secretary a good night, George beat her to the punch with more gossip.

“Timothy doesn’t like Sam.”

“Oh?” Magdalene wished with all her heart that she’d been able to keep

the air in her lungs, because true to form, George latched on to it immediately.

“Yes! He kept glaring at her all throughout the assembly. And then he was downright rude to her when Alden introduced her to the new trustees.”

Interesting. Not entirely surprising, but nonetheless, something to ponder. Both how to deal with Timothy’s resurgent possessiveness—if it was even real or just something George tended to magnify—and Alden. Especially since Magdalene had not seen him parse any special attention to any of the other teachers.

Still, any question focusing on Sam would only point George in that direction, and Magdalene was eager to avoid that at all costs. She appreciated and cherished her friend. But some things, some monumental things, like the fact that she was bisexual for example, Magdalene hadn’t shared with George.

If asked why, she would be hard-pressed to pinpoint the reason. Only Timothy and, apparently, her mother were privy to that part of her life. Was it fear? Of judgment? Of ostracization? She was fairly certain that the last relationship George had been in years ago at Rodante was with a woman.

And yet something about Sam, about what had transpired between them, and the revelations that Magdalene had had since—about herself and about her sexuality—felt so deeply personal, so intimate and private, that, coming out aside, she knew she would never share them.

Some aspects of her life were not meant to see the light of day, or be seen by the eyes of others. These were very much those aspects.

Plus, she’d been alone for so long. A nomad by profession, divorced and with mostly George for company and confidence—since she had been universally hated everywhere she went—sharing didn’t come easy to her. Not even with George. And Timothy’s presence in her life was easily explained. She trusted him. Despite the cheating, he had been her rock in every other aspect for so long. And she trusted so very few.

Diversion it was then. And since Timothy had popped into her mind, and knowing George’s raging animosity towards her ex-husband, Magdalene threw him to the wolves without a single regret.

“Maybe that was Timothy’s way of showing interest? You know how downright neanderthal men can be about women they like.”

Predictably, George’s eyes darkened with anger.

“So you’re saying he is up to his old tricks, then? Drooling over another

woman while trying to get back into your bed?”

Magdalene smiled inwardly. This derailing of the conversation always worked.

“He is free to drool over whomever he chooses to.” She had no intention of revealing that she was about as certain as one could be that he was absolutely not Sam’s cup of tea. Thank goodness.

But George was always most efficient when focused on something or someone. And she just loved being enraged with Timothy. Since he ignored her masterfully, absolutely unperturbed by the little ball of rage at his side, it took the issue off Magdalene’s hands and kept the peace. In fact, it had done so for years, ever since George helped her pack her things after Magdalene had caught Timothy cheating on her in their own bed.

Bygones... Long past bygones. And it did lead to a wonderful path of exploration...

Magdalene had long accepted her bisexuality, but she had only started to truly delve deeper into it after her divorce. So really, it hadn’t been all bad. Not all bad at all. She hid her smirk behind her tumbler.

“And as you can see, my bed is very much undisturbed, which really is quite the mercy, because it’s late.” Another eyebrow-raise, and George, her face suddenly pinkish again, shuffled towards the exit.

“Sure, sure, of course. Undisturbed bed, ha ha, you are just always so funny, Maggie. But yes, long... Very long day tomorrow. Lots to do and all that. Sleep well... Yes, very well!”

As the muttering and the wishes stopped behind the newly closed door, Magdalene leaned against it and took a deep breath. More relaxed now, she surveyed the room, trying to pinpoint the peculiar sensation that was washing over her. She took off the Vacheron, the titanium clanking loudly against the marble of the kitchen counter and suddenly, she knew.

The oddest sensation in the strangest and most inappropriate of places. *Serenity.*

Before she could delve into how ridiculous it was to feel serene when everything around her was in a complete state of upheaval—some by her own hand, but most due to the total desperation caused by incompetence and mismanagement—the scratch she thought she had imagined earlier sounded very clearly from the direction of the door.

It wasn’t that she was *scared* of mice... Not exactly. Magdalene Nox was not scared of anything. *Wary* was the word she would use. *Yes.* She was wary

of the disgusting little creatures who could climb up one's leg and get under one's clothes...

With one hand grabbing the broom and the other pulling the door wide open, Magdalene was prepared for pretty much anything. Except the cat. Who seemed to have absolutely no fear of her, nor of her probably quite frightening expression, or of the raised broom, for that matter. In fact, the cat sat back on its haunches, just like it had in her office, and gazed at her steadily, then at the room behind her, then back at her, their eyes meeting in eerie synchronicity.

"Well..." She hadn't realized she was about to speak until the words left her mouth, but the cat looked past her once again, and its half meow, half whine was perspicuous.

"Oh, no you don't!" The nerve of this critter. Magdalene gave the cat her best glare. "I don't know who lived here before me and whether you were welcomed, as you seem to be everywhere else in this damned place, but you are not here. So shoo!"

She motioned with the broom, but the cat's bicolored eyes were laser-focused on her now.

Magdalene set the broom aside and crossed her arms. "So it's going to be like that? Fine, sit here all night if you want. There is absolutely no way you are allowed in my room, you mangy animal."

Delighted that she'd had the last word, Magdalene closed the door firmly in the cat's calm face. *Too calm*, she thought.

Nonetheless, it was a small victory, and she was going to enjoy the rest of her whiskey in peace before taking a long shower and maybe catching at least a few hours of sleep before tomorrow brought more mayhem.

As she reached for the abandoned tumbler, the scratch at the door sounded again, now accompanied by a very pitiful meow.

"Absolutely not!"

Magdalene turned on her heel and marched towards the bathroom, all pretense of enjoying the drink abandoned. The second meow echoed through the short hallway right as she unbuttoned her dress. The garment hit the tile, and she stood in the doorway, undoing her garters when the third one permeated the air.

"This is ridiculous!"

Grabbing her robe from a hook—and how did George even know her habits in such detail?—Magdalene almost ran to the door for the second time

this evening. She was not going to stand for this.

As she wrenched it open, she found the cat exactly where she'd left it. On its haunches, gazing up at her.

Damn.

She crouched, bringing them closer, and stared back at the rotund creature. Orange, massive, with a big round head and heavy paws. The cat was zen itself. Unperturbed, it returned her glare without wavering.

When she finally lost the staring match, she hung her head, but not before nodding towards the room.

“Don't make yourself at home, though.”

She was Magdalene Nox, and she was having staring contests with feral creatures. Obviously, she must have lost her mind.

The cat gave her a curiously subdued look, then walked past her, unhurried. Once inside, as if it was the most polite of guests, it pawed at the little rug by the door before making a few circles and finally laying down in a perfect cat loaf. Within a few seconds, Magdalene heard soft snoring.

As she rose up, all she could think was that indeed, she had not stood for this. At all. In fact, the cat had totally played her like a toy store banjo while she had practically been kneeling in front of it, almost reverently, as if it were some kind of feline royalty. For some reason, as she picked up her whiskey and dropped the robe on her way to the shower, she did not feel defeated.

The snores grew louder and dammit if the studio didn't feel cozier for it.

OF NECESSARY EVILS & FELINE PROGRESS

Men... Men were a necessary evil. Magdalene had learned her lesson well at Candace's knee. And she tended to treat men as such. Sometimes necessary. Occasionally evil. Right now? They were the bane of her existence.

Alden was the distant evil. Timothy was the grudging necessity. And Joel? Joel was just a pain.

Since she'd begun at Dragons, the specter of Alden had cast its long shadow over everything she did. Fenway was close to him. Joel deferred to him. Sam seemed connected to him in some nebulous yet to be understood way. And he made a very good show of pretending to not remember Magdalene at all.

She didn't believe him. Not for a second. Granted, thirty years was a very long time to hold on to a memory of a child whose life you'd almost ruined and whom you'd discarded like a bunch of old rags. But if she knew anything about people like Stanton Alden, it was that they didn't reach, and more importantly retain, the heights they did by not doing their research and due diligence. Especially not if they were running for political office. Stanton Alden had to realize who Magdalene Nox was.

But he was silent on the matter. In fact, he was silent on all matters. In every single interaction they'd had, he said exactly nothing of substance that would tell her more about the initial position he'd taken regarding the school. To save it, or better yet, close it. No skin off his back.

Alden left the island the day she was introduced at the assembly—an assembly where he, again, sat somber and silent, his forearm supporting Orla and his eyes on the faculty.

As much as Magdalene loved a good mystery, he was too important a figure on the Board of Trustees to treat him as a mere curiosity. So she kept her counsel and her ear to the ground where he was concerned.

Still, if his immediate departure from Dragons and the fact that he entrusted the Transition Committee to Joel were any indication, his regard for his responsibilities as a trustee didn't seem all that high. And she was all too cognizant that Joel was a pain. An absolutely patronizing prick whom she needed to manage at all times, because he believed he needed to 'help' her. His ideas were foolish at best and incompetent, or downright dangerous at worst. He fancied himself savvy and shrewd, except all he was, was a privileged man who'd never worked a day in his life and had zero credentials, bar his trust fund and his position in Bostonian society.

All things considered, Magdalene could relate. After all, this could have been her. Candace had set her up financially ages ago with the settlement from her third divorce. Or had it been her fourth?

"I don't understand why you need a profession. Or why, if you do want one so badly, it has to be something as ghastly as education. Have you not had enough schools?"

Candace had grumbled and cajoled, but Magdalene went to Brown and Harvard to study pedagogy, anyway. And no, she didn't do it for Dragons, or in some desperate plan to return one day in a blaze of glory.

No, Magdalene hadn't had a plan, just a well-guarded and rarely nurtured hope. One that had finally come to fruition, three decades later, only to have ridiculous, unqualified men underfoot when she really would have preferred to be alone.

Like in the interview that she had held for one Samantha Anne Threadneedle.

"Please tell us the extent of your professional qualifications, Ms. Threadneedle." Joel's voice rose squeakily at the end of the question—specifically at the name—with a suggestiveness that abraded Magdalene's nerve endings. He always sounded strange and mildly disturbing when he mentioned Sam's name, but Magdalene couldn't yet pinpoint why.

Sam took his sniveling and pomposity in stride and, as she answered the question in a calm and factual manner, Magdalene sensed a set of eyes on her, the feeling just as disturbing as it was familiar. Looking up, she ran straight into Timothy's direct stare.

Yes, men were the bane of her existence, and this one was no exception.

He'd volunteered himself to be a part of the Transition Committee—surprise, surprise—and had not left her side these past few days. They ate together, they strategized together, and they sat in these meetings together, and throughout all this, Magdalene was keenly aware he had absolutely no interest in anything that was going on around him—except her. Which would be intolerable in and of itself—

“Ms. Threadneedle, we are familiar with your academic history, there's no need—” Joel's abrasive voice pulled her out of her musings in an abrupt and infuriating way. He had, after all, just asked Sam to enumerate her damn credentials.

Magdalene was about to raise her hand and set Joel straight, when Timothy's slightly bored baritone sounded from her right, proving yet again that—despite being a nuisance, rather useless, and motivated by all the wrong things—he was a necessity.

As a trustee, and the internal politics of the entire ordeal being what they were, he had the freedom to voice things Magdalene simply couldn't, even if she agreed with them. And on top of that, Timothy was able to do something else that, no matter how much she wanted to, the Headmistress couldn't dream of, because she had to remain professional. He could piss off Joel just for sport.

“Now, Joel. Since Ms. Threadneedle is Three Dragons' most decorated teacher, I think it merits focusing our attention on those accomplishments—especially since you yourself asked about them just minutes ago...” Timothy trailed off, polishing his nails on the front of his suit jacket. Joel bristled, while Sam attempted to hide a smile behind a cough. “However, I would like to hear Ms. Threadneedle's ideas about the Math Department and any possible structural changes the new school management might furnish to improve and optimize it.”

Yes, Timothy, of polished nails and bespoke suits, was definitely a necessity. He'd asked a good question. It stopped Joel from a certain tirade. It got Sam focused on the long term instead of the obvious conflict she had about applying for a job with management that she didn't approve of.

That last part in particular rankled Magdalene. Sam knew nothing about her plans. Granted, Magdalene had only a rather vague idea at the moment what those might be, other than to give in to the impulse to let the entire heap fall in on itself. And Sam knew little about what the school was going through. Yet she looked at her as if Magdalene Nox was the greatest foe to

walk this earth.

Sam wasn't the first person to harbor such resentment. Ever since Magdalene had become a rather notorious school reformer, people tended to hate her on sight. She had fired plenty of them in her lifetime, for no reason other than decimated budgets or to streamline the educational process.

So why did this make Magdalene's heart clench? She wanted to touch her sternum, where the ache that had been plaguing her lately throbbed with particular vigor every time she saw Sam's eyes cloud with animosity.

Her visceral reaction felt even more out of place, since Sam appeared to get along great with everyone else, including George, who seemed to have become a confidant of sorts. Magdalene frequently saw her huddled with Sam over breakfast these days, casting shady glances in Timothy's direction and undoubtedly gossiping.

She wanted to shake her head. Mostly at herself for being as torn as she was. And she wanted to roll her eyes at the childish drama surrounding her.

At least the breathy phone calls had stopped. The new number was holding.

Magdalene allowed herself to close her eyes for a moment. She wished all these people gone so she could speak to Sam. But she dared not approach her. Not yet.

The rest of the interview went well. Better than well, since she herself signed the contract half an hour after Sam left the meeting room. So well, in fact, that the ever-responsible and by-the-book Magdalene Nox had decided to shelve a couple of formalities until she had time to spare. So smoothly indeed, that she'd invited the newly re-appointed Math Chair to the Transition Committee.

But Magdalene nonetheless felt weak through the course of the day. Raw.

She was more open and more vulnerable to this woman than she thought was wise, and so after their initial ill-advised exchange of honesties in the Headmistress' office, Magdalene knew she should keep her distance, especially now that Sam had been rehired.

A WEEK PASSED, and as she took careful steps up the winding, gravel-filled path, Magdalene tried to chase thoughts of Sam away. She passed the jasmine

bushes, shaking her head at her younger self, who'd chosen a signature scent with such an obvious nod to this place.

When she finally reached the precipice and felt the ocean's salt on her face, she inhaled deeply, her lungs filling with the evening air tinged with tumult and revolt. She flexed her arms and her watch jingled, cold titanium and platinum sliding down her wrist.

But even amid the jasmine scent and the weight on her hand, her shoulders sagged in relief, the Amber Cliff doing what it had done years ago as well as these past few days. It brought peace. A peace she cherished and a peace she never quite wanted to leave.

The ache in her chest that was becoming a constant companion, pushed at the bone, as if wanting to escape, and she didn't know if setting it free would tear her open or heal her. But Magdalene wasn't about to chance it, the indulgence in pain, a dangerous illusion. So she cradled her arms around herself to keep it in.

A sudden sound from behind made her whip around, her stance defensive. At the sight of Sam, who stood stock-still for a moment before mimicking Magdalene's position, the tension eased by a fraction. Yet she could still feel the tightness of her jaw and her clenched teeth as she watched Sam's face lighten up degree by degree, and finally Magdalene exhaled.

She tried not to be obvious about it, but after the week they'd had, the relief that washed over her at seeing Sam relax in her presence was honeysuckle-sweet. Maybe they wouldn't need to be enemies after all.

"You've found my little hidey-hole, Professor Threadneedle."

Ever since Magdalene had signed the paperwork for Sam's rehiring, she had not called her anything but 'Professor Threadneedle'. She told herself she was doing it to underscore Sam's now fully affirmed position, especially since she could tell that Sam was not out of the closet to her colleagues and perhaps not even to the previous leadership.

After Joel's summons to return to the school's Christian roots, the pompous ass might as well have been calling for another crusade from atop his soapbox instead of introducing the new administration. In that moment, it must have felt awful to hear that and be queer and without a permanent contract. Goddess knew her own ironclad one had given her plenty of peace. So Magdalene made a point to emphasize the title often.

Yet she knew that, as much as she did it for Sam, it was not entirely altruistic. She was the Headmistress. And in front of her stood a subordinate.

An employee. And hence...

And hence...

In spite of everything, it felt strange to walk around the school and have another person on the grounds know her secret. Strange, yet freeing, despite the dangers of not being completely out herself. She was certain Sam viewed their history as a weapon of mutually assured destruction. But to Magdalene, who had held this one piece of herself away from everyone's eyes, the fact that Sam knew gave her a tantalizing rush. It felt daring and absolutely unsafe, but also exciting and, in the moments when she allowed herself the freedom to think in those terms, arousing.

Magdalene turned and took another step, her move sudden enough that she heard Sam's breath catch as the jagged edge of the cliff loomed closer. She inhaled deeply, the salt from the ocean carried by the nascent storm, once more suffusing her lungs, the elation just as overwhelming as the thick, electrified air. Was Sam concerned for her? The thought warmed her unexpectedly, loosening something around her heart which, once freed, sped up and Magdalene turned her back to the foaming ocean. If her eyes stung, she blamed it on the elements.

In front of her, just a few steps away—certainly closer than she thought she'd be—Sam shuffled her feet, giving Magdalene a look of hope mixed with caution.

“Ah, I think we might've found each other's hidey-holes? I try to come here whenever I can. And would you mind not standing so close to the edge? Dragons are ruthless, and Amber more so than the other two.”

Sam's voice was a little breathless.

“Is that why you choose to spend your evenings on this particular cliff? Because she's more dangerous than the rest? I think I'm beginning to understand you're secretly an adrenaline junkie.” Magdalene, still warmed by the earlier realization that Sam worried about her, allowed her lips to quirk upwards.

“Yep, adrenaline junkie - that's me. Bungee jumping and paragliding and skydiving. All those things. Ask anyone.” Sam stuffed her hands in her pockets and hid a smile that hadn't seemed entirely sincere behind the neckline of the oversized sweatshirt she was bundled into. It looked four sizes too big for the lithe and fine-boned frame, and Magdalene had the sudden urge to touch it, to feel if it was as soft as it looked. She stuck her hands in her pockets to avoid temptation.

Stick to the topic!

“I *have* asked, and I don’t believe anyone described you even remotely in those terms. Dependable, steady, responsible. Those were more along the lines of what others say about you, Professor Threadneedle. Could it be that, with one exception, you have done nothing reckless in your entire life?”

No, Magdalene thought as she watched Sam blush furiously and burrow her face further inside the cozy garment, she could not stick to the subject at hand to save her life. This woman just brought out something in her, awakened an impulsivity she was not at all familiar with. She felt reckless, her breathing shallow and fast, in perfect sync with her speeding heart. Why was she even alluding to their night in Manhattan?

She knew why. As Sam’s massive gray eyes peaked from the folds of the sweatshirt, Magdalene felt her heart squeeze.

Adorable...

“You spoke to our colleagues about me?” The voice had that shy quality to it, reminiscent of their time in the elevator, as if a panic attack was imminent, and her impulse to reach out and comfort was just as strong now as it had been then.

At least Sam had settled on a rather safe subject, all things considered.

“I hired you, Professor. I had to check references.” The astonishment on Sam’s face made her want to laugh. Instead, she settled on letting a smile bloom freely. There were some perks to this job she was really going to enjoy, and taking Sam by surprise was definitely going to be one of them.

A pang in one of her heeled feet chose that moment to remind her of the long day she’d had. She took a few steps towards Sam and made to sit in the grass. Before she could, Sam scrambled and took off her hoodie, spreading it on the ground.

“Chivalrous to a fault.” She wanted to sigh at the sweetness of the gesture, and when she spoke, she knew her voice was a little dreamy, but damn if this wasn’t one of the most adorable things anyone had done for her in a long time. The memory of a shoe slipping off her foot and Timothy ignoring it intruded. Why was she even comparing the two? Magdalene had a feeling Sam would stop traffic if need be to retrieve her shoe. Just like she was sacrificing her own comfort for the sake of Magdalene’s.

“That dress is a work of art, it would be a shame to ruin it.” Sam’s eyes left a trail as sensual as a caress as they glanced at her from under those long lashes.

“Dry cleaners exist even in this godforsaken place.”

Magdalene inhaled sharply. The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. Her resentment for the simplicity and desolation of this backwater that usually bubbled below the surface was rearing its head and roaring. It always made her breath stutter a little as it took her by surprise.

Like when she'd inspected the dormitories and found them to be in shambles? Or when she realized the island had the spottiest cell reception known to humankind? That the internet was unreliable and the computers ancient? That a strange cat insisted on sleeping on the doormat in her studio apartment, and she had yet to find a way to stop it from coming over every evening like clockwork?

Goddess, maybe her mother was right about some things and she had let this resentment and this pain fester for too long?

Her jaw tightened. No, she had a job to do and Sam—of the bright eyes and curious glances and the adorable brow wrinkles when she was pensive—would not distract her.

A distraction of her own was in order, so she changed the subject.

“Speaking of ruined things. What is your bone of contention with Tullinger? He goes out of his way to avoid you and you go out of yours to hide the utter contempt you feel for him. You don't have the obfuscation skills to quite manage that, Professor.”

“Ah, my famed lack of a poker face.” Sam's eyes shone so bright, Magdalene was mesmerized.

And so she felt her lips quirk upwards yet again but scrambled to school her features. No need to distract Sam by allowing her to realize just how thoroughly transparent she was right now—contemplative and puzzled and reluctant to share.

Sam looked out on the open waters. Magdalene knew how deceptive they were, always ready to turn stormy and angry in a heartbeat, and she could see the turmoil on that honest face. Caginess wasn't something that was easy or inherent to this woman. But to Magdalene, treachery was also not an unfamiliar foe, always having to be on her toes, no matter where she went. After all, she had been backstabbed at every single school she'd served.

Yet how to explain to Sam that hurting her was the last thing she wanted? Magdalene sat in silence, giving Sam the time and the choice to share as much or as little as she wanted.

“I'm sure you're familiar with my history at Dragons. Well, as much of it

as is reflected in documentation...” Magdalene nodded, struggling not to reach out and smooth that troubled brow. Yes, she had read Sam’s file and had been surprised at the story even before she knew who Samantha Anne Threadneedle was.

“Stanton Alden and Fredrick Tullinger were my legal guardians, with the school acting as the de facto one, considering I spent pretty much all my time here. Sometimes, either one or the other of the gentlemen would invite me to their homes for holidays and such. I was thirteen when I received my last invitation to spend Christmas with the Tullingers. I socked Joel for being... I guess you can say a pretty horrible brat to me during their Christmas celebration, calling me a dirty orphan and having particularly nasty things to say about my mother and her abandoning me like the worthless human he believed I was. Alden, who was also invited to the Christmas celebration at the Tullingers’, took one look at Joel writhing in the snow, his nose broken and blood gushing everywhere, and told me to get my things.”

Magdalene’s fingers dug into the dirt and grass and she felt a rage unlike any she’d experienced in a very long time. She knew men like these all too well, had been a pawn in their games too many times herself, and despised them with a vengeance. And she was going to strangle that overgrown bully Joel the moment she saw him again.

Sam seemed to read something on her face, but barreled on, voice breaking either from the speed of the narration or emotion, which made Magdalene’s urge to throttle Joel even stronger.

“That’s okay though.” The disheveled head bowed, and Sam took a steadying breath. “I was spared any further boring gatherings over dry turkey. So no hard feelings on my part. Alden didn’t even read me the riot act or punish me in any other way. Hell, he even left me the Christmas present that had been stashed under the massive spruce in the Tullingers’ foyer, so I guess he was not entirely disapproving of my behavior. Anyway, long story short, Joel has stayed away from me since then, and his nose has been giving him trouble from being set wrong, from what I gather. Score one for the ‘dirty orphan.’”

They had thrown her out. Again. Like a stray kitten. Packed her away. Out of sight, out of mind. The grass under Magdalene’s fingers was wet, like congealed blood, as she tore through it with ease, fingers digging into the dirt with savage abandon. Grown men playing gods yet again. She hated them.

“I bet you’d have expelled me for fighting, Headmistress.”

Sam's words jolted her out of her violent desire to rip these people limb from limb. She was glad that Sam had misinterpreted her anger, as it was now combined with the misery incurred by both Sam and her at the hands of these men. After all, it would involve way too much explaining, and she wasn't ready for that.

Ready for that? Why was she even considering it?

She bit the inside of her cheek and took a careful breath before speaking.

“Considering the way your mere presence continues to intimidate Joel and how you still jump in feet first to defend lost causes, I believe you can't be saved from your hooligan ways, Professor Threadneedle. And speaking of things that cannot be saved...”

She looked past Sam and gazed steadily down at the ocean, its rhythmic motion hypnotizing her as the waves calmed her yet again. They always did. And so did the jasmine, both at her pulse points and all around her, the late blossoms engulfing her in that elusive sense of peace.

It helped her utter the next words, knowing that they would likely cause a conflagration. Sam's temper was something she was already quite familiar with.

“I am leaning towards not hiring Doctor Fenway for the position of English Chair. Her interview was a mess, and her leadership has been nothing short of lacking in the past years.”

She could see Sam's throat work.

“This school is her entire life.”

Magdalene turned away from her companion. She had a pretty good idea why Sam was pleading. Just a few days ago, she had summarily dismissed both Ruth Trufault and Jen Rovington, and a whole slew of others. She even had replacements lined up for most of them already. She hadn't hired them yet, mostly because she still faltered in her decision about her final goal for the school, close or keep, but her pragmatism did not allow her to not have contingency plans.

Still, the idea that Sam was begging her to save this woman—the one who was chiefly responsible for the state of the school—rankled. Magdalene chose not to consider the why. Did it really matter?

“I am hard-pressed to believe that. The school is in ruins, Professor, and while a large part of that is due to the neglect that the trustees have inflicted on the Academy and the endowment, her decisions as headmistress were equally ruinous. Surely you can see that now that you've been privy to some

of them.”

Magdalene had seen Sam’s face blanch quite a few times during the Transition Committee’s financial meetings. Claiming ignorance was no longer a choice.

Sam bit her lower lip before her jaw set into the stubborn line that Magdalene had also started to recognize. She sighed. No, she hadn’t expected this particular decision to be received without issue, but Sam was in full war mode.

“I think it’s easy to cast stones post-factum, Headmistress.” The rise of Sam’s tone—from calm and sad to piercing—told a story in itself, and it only spurred Magdalene into sarcasm.

“Ah, the aforementioned defense of lost causes and the famed loyalty. That was another quality of yours that people kept bringing up. Your loyalty. You have quite a number of commendable traits. I can attest to some of them myself.”

The last line had been absolutely uncalled for, but it was like a conflagration of two unstoppable forces meeting in a shock of fireworks. Eyes blazing, Sam looked back at her, angry, beautiful.

For God’s sake, Magdalene.

“I would appreciate it if we kept this professional, Headmistress.”

Well, touché. And so Magdalene just nodded for Sam to continue. “I also appreciate that you have a hard task, but surely you are making it much harder by dismissing people who are qualified pedagogues. Orla Fenway may be a bad headmistress in your eyes, but she is an esteemed teacher in the eyes of hundreds. And not only are you firing her, you are further alienating the faculty and the student body with your... decisions.”

Magdalene shook her head and allowed for the deep sigh she’d been holding back to slip out.

This woman... Of all people, God, why this woman?

“Well, *direct* and *honest* were mentioned as well.” Before Sam could explode in another outburst of outrage, Magdalene waved her away. Now was not the time to tease. Now *was* the time for some very painful truths, and Sam would have to just accept them, because whilst loyalty was a nice quality, willful ignorance was not.

“Professor Threadneedle, I will do everything and anything to ensure that the school perseveres. That it survives. Too much is riding on my success. You seem to operate under some misguided conviction that I care about what

the faculty or the student body think. I couldn't care less. That is not how this school will thrive. You have all been coddled and sheltered, and left to rot in slovenliness and complacency. Orla Fenway might be a stellar teacher, but she was indeed a disaster of a headmistress."

Magdalene blinked and did a double take. She intended on throwing some uncomfortable facts in Sam's face, but the words that had tumbled out of her mouth surprised even her. And now that they had, she didn't know what to do with them. They hung in the air like fog, obscuring what lay beyond, hiding the very reasoning for their existence from her eyes.

As Sam jumped to her feet and stalked towards the cliff, either to distance herself from Magdalene or to try to reign in her noticeable temper, a chill ran through Magdalene as she found herself missing the warmth of her closeness.

"Orla Fenway has kept Dragons alive while those people you seem to bow to did nothing to help her!" Sam half-turned as she spoke, the wind further disheveling her braid, the escaping hair framing the tumultuous face.

Magdalene allowed herself a smile full of poison. She really did hate these men. "The trustees are a necessary evil. They rule the school and manage the endowment."

"Well, where were they when their management was needed? When Orla was left to fend for Dragons alone?" Sam's eyes grew wide, and Magdalene wondered if she was even capable of stopping herself at this point. And yet she had never been more attractive than this, windblown and angry and powerless, yet holding Magdalene's attention with the ease of a magician. When had she become partial to runaway trains? They were never safe. They were harbingers of wrecks.

Heat rose in Magdalene's cheeks and her breathing shallowed. Oblivious, Sam went on, those long fingers keeping score of her recitation.

"Where were they when we had to expand the northern wing to accommodate the increasing number of students? Where were they when, ten years ago, the Astronomy Tower on Viridescent Cliff was left to rot, abandoned for a lack of funds? Where were they when dozens of scholarship students needed books and uniforms? Those girls had to be housed and taught. The scholarships were tacitly approved by the trustees, yet unsupported by the endowment. Where were they when students like Amanda were struggling to find a place in over ten other schools? Dragons was the only institution that accepted her! And yet all the Board ever did was

throw roadblocks at us every step of the way.”

The words acted like a cold shower, breaking the spell.

The ever-blessed—or cursed—scholarships.

They were a thorn in her side, with the math simply not adding up on the funding and the legalities of everything surrounding this issue being totally ignored by the previous administration. She couldn't contain the sigh.

“I will leave aside for now the discussion about how the scholarships even came to be since the school's charter specifically prohibits outside sources of funding and the endowment is beggared. Dragons took way too big of a bite and is in ruins now precisely because the percentage of scholarship students highly exceeds what the endowment can comfortably support.”

Sam whirled on her with renewed fire in her eyes, and Magdalene's breath caught in her chest.

“With all due respect, Headmistress, screw *comfortable*, these children deserve an education, and housing, and the best things we can provide for them.”

She wanted to reach out and grab this woman and shake her. Then kiss her. Then shake her some more. Magdalene closed her eyes to try to chase away the tantalizing images.

“It's precisely this attitude that brought about the current situation, Professor Threadneedle. Expanding things when the money was tight, admitting new charity cases—”

“Children aren't charity cases! These girls are a miracle, each and every one of them.”

Sam paced away, visibly struggling to get her ragged breathing under control, and Magdalene took that time to try to settle her own racing heart.

But Sam wasn't finished, and when she returned, her face alight with righteousness, it really should not have been as downright sensual as it was. And it definitely shouldn't be doing the things it was doing to Magdalene's insides.

“And how can you be such a hypocrite? You speak of doing what's best for the school, yet it seems that the actual best is solely for the trustees' benefit! You are here to return the school to its religious roots, which might as well be like plunging it back into the 19th century. How can you do this, when you yourself have no problem engaging in... well... you know...” Sam gestured awkwardly between the two of them, trying and failing to control a

nervous stammer. “Yet you push all this sanctimony on us all. How do you sleep at night?”

Well, if she needed a cold shower to douse all her thoroughly inappropriate thoughts, she had certainly gotten one. Being called a hypocrite tended to do that to one’s aforementioned insides. Magdalene wanted to scoff at herself. Sam might not be indifferent to her, but her loyalty to this rotten heap of stone and wood and these incompetent people was clearly stronger than whatever thin thread connected the two of them ever since they’d walked into the same bar.

So be it...

“I sleep just fine, Professor.” Magdalene said nothing else as she rose from the now-soiled hoodie. Under different circumstances she’d have offered to have it cleaned, but her own banked anger didn’t allow her any concessions just yet. She needed to get away from these wounded eyes and this concerned expression. And she needed to hurry.

“What will you do?”

Despite the gentle tone, Magdalene had had enough. And her own battered heart could only take so much.

“Whatever is required. Whatever those before me felt was too hard to do.” With those words, she turned on her heel and strode back to the cursed mansion that had once again taken something from her.

NIGHT FELL, blanketing her frayed thoughts and her runaway emotions. Restless, lonely, she poured a glass of Glenfiddich and forced herself to sip it, even though the impulse was to throw it back and fill another tumbler.

Magdalene paced, occasionally stopping by the window where the rain was drawing patterns on the glass that she didn’t try to interpret. She feared they might spell her doom, since this place, as ever, made her weak. And now, with the added ‘bonus’ of Sam, Magdalene felt off-kilter, her usual acuity lost to attraction and self-doubt.

As she walked away from observing the pouring rain, she caught herself glancing at her watch, then stopped dead in her tracks. She was *not* waiting for the cat. She wasn’t. This was the *absolute last* humiliation she would allow for one day.

Magdalene deliberately slammed shut the door to the bathroom, knowing the barrier would drown out the now familiar scratch at the door. Halfway into her shower, she groaned at herself for being so ridiculous and threw a towel over her wet body, rushing to the front door. As she pulled it open, the tom sat there, tail wrapped around the front paws, all the patience in the world in the bicolored eyes blinking up at her.

She sighed and shivered, wet and cold under the soggy towel. As if sensing her discomfort, the cat did what it had never done before. It slowly walked closer to her and, after a quick glance up, as if seeking permission, rubbed its warm, furry side against her ice-cold calf. Fur stuck to her skin. It felt rather disgusting. For some unfathomable reason, Magdalene bore it stoically.

That night, the tom slept on the pillow she'd casually—too casually to fool either of them—thrown from her bed and onto the floor next to it.

From the little carpet by the front door and into her bedroom in a week. Magdalene wanted to shake her fist at the deities who governed this place, but she feared the Dragons might just laugh at her. Yet as it turned out, the loud half snore, half purr coming from the side of her bed was better than any white noise machine, lulling her to sleep and keeping her loneliness at bay.

OF DROPPED BOMBSHELLS & STALE SECRETS

Three weeks into her time as the new Headmistress, and Magdalene felt she had approached one of the inflection points of her tenure. It was time.

In her office, now finally purged of macrame and the smell of stale beverages and rotten food, she made herself comfortable in her chair, crossed her legs, took a sip of coffee, and without looking at anyone in particular, dropped the bomb.

“I am doing away with the Houses.”

Shocked gasps, stunned silence, and Sam choking on her water with George pounding her on the back were all worthwhile responses to such a pronouncement. Magdalene congratulated her more theatrical side for this singular display of drama. She took her small pleasures where she could get them these days.

Sam wheezed, George tsked over her, Timothy raised his eyes from the latest thriller he kept bringing to the meetings. The weasel leering at Sam, also known as David Uttley—the newly confirmed History Chair and the latest addition to the Transition Committee—had his jaw hanging somewhere near the floor. Even Joel seemed speechless.

Magdalene had expected the reactions. The Houses, one for each dragon—Sky Blue, Viridescent, and Amber—corresponding to the cliffs that the school perched upon, were deeply ingrained in the life and routine of the institution, with the student body being divided into them from their first day at school. Their removal would be like pulling off a bandaid that had become a second skin. She might as well amputate instead of flay, considering the amount of perceived damage she was about to inflict.

Except Magdalene knew she was right. The Houses were a problem. A much bigger one than anyone around the table recognized or wanted to acknowledge.

After her rather rash declaration to Sam that she would do what she could for the school to persevere, Magdalene knew there was no going back. Moreover, when all was said and done, did she really want to renege? She didn't have an answer to that particular question, her heart still split between detesting this island and this school and these people, and something small and warm that had taken residence in her conscience and would not let go.

So maybe she'd keep this rusty barge afloat then. Magdalene was unsure how she would go about the entire thing, but that much seemed doable. Difficult, but for someone with her acumen and experience, achievable. She could cut the budget and fire the teachers and cull the school of curriculum frivolities and perhaps even manage to attain that elusive fiscal balance. However, to merely keep the school open, she wouldn't need to delve as deep into the heart of Dragons as the damned Houses were.

So why was she actually developing a plan to not just ensure the survival of this damn place, but was actually setting it on a course to thrive?

The past few weeks hadn't managed to answer that question for her, and the wound in her chest still gaped wide open.

Still, Houses were a risky business, particularly because of how deeply ingrained belonging to something was in human nature. The old Dragonettes, the school alumni, were certain to burn her in effigy on the quad when all of this would be over.

Since silence continued to reign, Magdalene infused her voice with as much malice as she could before breaking through it. She might as well interject some more drama.

"From your highly intelligent facial expressions and lack of opposition, I can surmise that you are all on board?" She knew she was pushing it, and as much as she enjoyed the theatrics and the whining, their reaction was still infuriating. If she walked into the room and stated her intention to burn the school to the ground, she would bet she'd not have gotten this level of shock.

Sam found her voice first. Because, of course, she did.

"With all due respect, Headmistress—"

Oh no, she was not going to go down this road, especially not in front of all these people and George, who—fully in the know about the plans in her role as Magdalene's confidant—was staunchly observing everything around

her, ready to jump to her defense at a moment's notice. Magdalene lifted a hand to stop whatever Sam was going to sputter next.

“Every time I hear anyone begin their tirade with ‘all due respect,’ I assume none of the said respect is about to be given.”

George laughed out loud, and Joel gave out that scratchy half-giggle of his before quickly sobering, probably remembering that it was Sam's attempted defense of the Houses he was laughing at. He coughed, pinched the mangled bridge of his nose, and extended a tentative hand towards Magdalene.

“Surely you're joking?” His tone was incredulous, as if deciding whether to view the whole proposal as a ruse or to start puffing up in outrage at the realization that she was completely serious.

“Headmistress—” Sam tried again.

“If you are about to tell me that the Houses are the oldest tradition, that they unify, that they teach teamwork, that they band the girls together in battle or whatever utterly inane demagoguery they've been feeding you since you were a student here yourself Professor Threadneedle, I would ask you not to proceed any further.”

Sam bit her lower lip and nodded. Magdalene did not deign to provide any further response. She was well aware this was not the end of this issue. In fact, it was only the very beginning of it, judging by how slowly Sam was packing up her things and letting all the others vacate the premises in a clear attempt to stay behind.

David Uttley, the aforementioned weasel whom Magdalene did not like for reasons she didn't care to verbalize—other than George declaring him and Sam to be an adorable couple and thus ruining Magdalene's evening two nights ago—clearly recognized Sam's attempt to continue the conversation and gave her one of those big, goofy smiles that grated on Magdalene's nerves.

If he wasn't as good at his job as he was, Magdalene wouldn't have rehired him. God knows, she had tried her best to turn his interview into an unmitigated disaster. He'd passed by the skin of his teeth, and she'd been forced to admit she was somewhat impressed. Somewhat. His lovesick smile and his cringeworthy thumbs up made her clench her teeth and reconsider.

Joel stood up quickly, his nostrils flaring and his mouth agape, almost trembling at the prospect of a confrontation, whether from fear or anticipation. But Magdalene had dealt with overbearing bullies like him her

entire life. She raised her hand again, the gesture as effective the second time as it had been the first. Seeing him shut his mouth with a snap of that weak jaw sent a small thrill through her.

“Joel, we can discuss this further. I’m sure your knowledge, understanding, and insightful advice will guide me and shape my opinion further on this matter, and if all else fails, you can help me articulate my position better.”

He puffed up at the praise, and out of the corner of her eye, Magdalene could have sworn she noticed Sam suppressing a gag. She just hoped it was because Sam saw through her maneuver to tie him to her side without giving him the opportunity to sidestep her trap and was disgusted by how easy he was to manipulate.

He bowed to her rather clumsily, almost stepping on the cat who’d swaggered in, his arrival signaling eleven o’clock. As Joel cursed under his breath, the tom just meowed. Magdalene smiled because it sounded like profanity. One thing she could say about the furball—he had attitude. *Cattitude*. And ‘he’? When had the cat become a ‘he’?

As the tom plopped his bulk on the pillow behind her, Magdalene remembered how she’d petted him last night and how soft and warm his fur had been. She’d have to take that to her grave, because there was no way she’d be able to live it down otherwise.

While the cat kneaded his bedding and stretched, prior to making a neat loaf and proceeding to purr as loudly as a tractor, Magdalene gave Sam a long look.

Time to get this show on the road.

“I assume you’ve stayed behind to plead the case for the Houses.”

“Yes.”

God, she did not want to have this conversation.

Magdalene stood up and, on her way around the desk, surprised herself by giving the cat’s ear a quick scratch. Willoughby leaned into the touch and purred louder as his warmth and the feeling of the little engine under her fingertips gave her comfort and soothed her.

When she finally raised her eyes to the other occupant of the office, Sam’s face was undergoing a fascinating transformation, from displeasure and clear disapproval, to a sudden stare at the hand that was caressing the cat. Magdalene’s hand. The expressive face gave it all away—the blush, the widening of the pupils, the clear recollection of the time Magdalene had her

hands on Sam's skin.

The earlier anticipation of a fight, the months of memories and reliving their night together, how they fit, how Sam's body felt against hers, how she acted so out of character and yet so absolutely perfect in her own skin, coupled with the days of silent resistance and stolen looks between them seemed to bubble over, heat crawling up Magdalene's spine, making her shiver, making her want... Except she couldn't, they couldn't, and Sam shouldn't.

"Don't..."

Magdalene said it very quietly, the whisper broken, more an exhalation than an actual spoken word. Sam watched her, visibly shaken, the gray eyes wide and full of desire. All the anger, all the resentment, and yet one memory, and they were back where it had all started, in the poorly lit bar in Manhattan, with words of poetry and longing between them.

Magdalene knew she should break off this moment that stretched for what felt like an eternity, but she allowed herself one more look. The sun's angle gave Sam's hair a golden hue, and the way it fell over the long neck, in places obscuring and in others revealing the expanse of skin Magdalene knew the taste of, was mouthwatering. It was wrong, so wrong, and so greedy of her, so selfish and dangerous to stand here, door ajar, and drink in the one person she could never have.

Have Sam?

The thought both surprised her and elated her in equal measure. Where had it come from? Magdalene sighed. Like the school, like this island, this woman had simply snuck up on her, entered her mind, and made herself comfortable. Or was it that Magdalene was comfortable with the idea of her?

She knew that her face, her eyes, spoke volumes. One would have to be blind not to realize how deeply both of them had been thrown into this conundrum of fate. Of all the places in the world, of all the schools, the universe had to place her Sam in Dragons, so close Magdalene had only to lift a hand to touch, yet she was forever forbidden.

Her position, Sam's job, the Charter, the accursed school. Yes, begrudgingly she was coming around to the idea of saving this heap, but it had been the object of her wrath for so long, it was hard to relinquish that. Magdalene wanted to laugh, but didn't dare for fear she'd be unable to stop herself and dissolve into hysteria.

As if clearing it, Sam shook her head slightly, and Magdalene took it as a

sign that the spell was broken. It was time to move past the awkwardness of the moment. The room was filled with so much yearning; it was a miracle they were not spontaneously combusting.

Sam spoke first, and Magdalene held out some hope that maybe they wouldn't talk about the Houses at all. Maybe Sam knew to leave well enough alone, especially now that one spark could set them both ablaze.

"Have you made a decision on Professor Fenway?"

Despite being grateful for the pivot, Magdalene faltered slightly in scratching under the sleeping cat's chin. He opened his eyes and gave Sam what could only be described as a look of total condemnation for the interruption.

Well, this wasn't a difficult question to answer. Orla's interview had gone abysmally, but Magdalene failed to secure her replacement. And after pondering the issue for a week, she'd decided that keeping her enemies close was the prudent thing here. No mistake about it, Fenway hated her with a vengeance that Magdalene at times struggled to explain.

There was another reason, one that perhaps outweighed all of the above, but Magdalene really didn't want to give it voice.

"Yes, I decided to keep Professor Fenway at Dragons. She agreed to a probationary year as English Chair. We shall see how it goes."

Magdalene allowed herself a small smile when Sam's breath left her lungs in an audible whoosh.

"Well, that's... well, that's good. Thank you. May I ask what changed your mind?"

Magdalene's smile bloomed fully, and she considered how to best avoid disclosing why on Earth she'd decided to keep Orla Fenway around. And not just the rationales she had stated to herself and to George every time they'd talked. Those were all valid, but there was also another small reason. Revealing her motive to Sam was both dangerous and tantalizing. After a moment, she cleared her throat and chose the middle ground.

"Despite a number of people spreading rumors to the contrary, I actually do try to take all information into account when making a decision, Professor. I listen."

"You mean..."

"I mean that you made a compelling case."

Yes, she had made a compelling case, and that light in those wide-open eyes made Magdalene's heart stutter. Seeing Sam smile was worth all the

insanity that had surely possessed her when she'd offered Orla the contract. She could see the wild hammering of the pulse in Sam's neck, and had to curl her fingers into fists to keep from reaching out. She knew how that spot smelled, how the pulse fluttered there, that sensation of that heartbeat against her fingertips, against her mouth.

And so on the heels of desire, came the predictable fear. She couldn't be thinking this. She could *not* be doing this. The danger, brightened red and made hot by sharp desire, was too monumental to even consider.

Clearing her throat, she waved her hand and effectively ended the moment that had stretched long enough. "Of course, I also spoke to the trustees and some of the current and former students, but overall, your staunch defense of the esteemed—or, depending on your point-of-view, less esteemed—Professor Fenway got the ball rolling. So if she has one individual to thank for still being at Dragons, it would be you, Professor Threadneedle."

Sam's shoulders seemed to sag, and Magdalene thought she had seen the light dim in her eyes just a touch. Well, it was only for the best. Neither of them could risk anything at this point.

"Except gratitude isn't why I provided the defense I did."

No, no, she wouldn't even consider going anywhere near that. Instead, she made a point of being deliberately obtuse.

"Ah, yes, she is essential to the school."

Sam averted her gaze for a moment, then narrowed her eyes and stood up straight in a gesture Magdalene recognized as the harbinger of a new battle.

"Headmistress, the Houses are essential for the school, too."

Magdalene took a deep breath when she really wanted to raise a fist and shake it at the sky.

This woman...

"Of course. You are like a dog with a bone. A new bone, I should say, since we have settled one of your charity cases." At Sam's look of outrage and deep offense, Magdalene simply waved a dismissive hand again. "Fine, fine, I apologize. Orla Fenway is no one's charity case, obviously. Next thing, you will challenge me to a duel over Joanne Dorsea."

The transformation on Sam's features from belligerent to outright mourning was so stark, Magdalene swallowed a laugh as her heart simultaneously clenched in pity for Sam, while she really wanted to groan.

"No, stop." She pressed her lips together, flicked an annoyed gaze skyward, and walked away from the desk. In the distance, surrounded by the

cold, coarse stone of the windowsill and the fraying paint on the wooden frame, she could see the ocean, and for once she wished it would not mellow her out so much. She was clearly at a disadvantage here, even if Sam had no idea about the effect she had on her.

“Do not give me the kicked-puppy look. Before you actually mount another campaign, let me reassure you that Professor Dorsea is safe and sound and will continue at Dragons. She will not remain in the Art Chair position. Her health condition prevents her from doing so. But she agreed to stay on as a member of the Residential Faculty. The students love her, and having her closer to the dormitories will be a boon for everyone. And she’ll still teach photography. So—”

“So she keeps the job she likes, adds another that she will excel at, and gives up the bureaucracy and paperwork she hates as the Art Chair. Thank you.” There were actual tears in Sam’s eyes when Magdalene finally turned back around, and to say she wasn’t prepared to face that, to deal with that—to begin to consider that she had caused that, even in good conscience—was an understatement.

Magdalene played with the collar of her blouse, tugging gently on the expensive silk. She was going soft. She must be. There was no other explanation for why she’d invited Joanne Dorsea for an interview. Her health was such, Magdalene could have easily refused her the opportunity to even try to apply for her old job.

Her own memories of the woman and the role she’d played in Magdalene’s humiliation thirty years ago surely would have been enough to support that decision.

Except there was that aforementioned softness...

Magdalene had interviewed Professor Dorsea alone, since she was certain the woman wouldn’t hold up to the sadistic questioning Joel tended to subject his victims to.

She did, however, not deign to do it in the designated conference room, instead asking the older women to join her for a walk. For someone with bad knees, Joanne kept up admirably. Granted, Magdalene had chosen the easiest path, and they found themselves on Amber Cliff in no time. As she turned to face Joanne, the resignation on those long-familiar features told her enough.

“I guess I deserve to be dismissed here, in the very place where you learned of your punishment, Magdalene.” Joanne’s voice was permeated with sadness, but there was a note to it that sounded acutely like guilt.

Magdalene walked closer to the edge, turning her head into the wind, drawing out the moment. But about fifteen seconds in, the weight settled on her shoulders, and she rubbed her chest, hand over beating heart. She didn't want to be here with Joanne. She only wanted to be here with Sam, and if she wanted her peace, Sam would have to have hers as well.

And Joanne was important to Sam. Above anyone else on this speck of dirt in the Atlantic, Magdalene had come to learn that Joanne was the mother Sam had never had. And as Magdalene looked into the tired eyes of her former teacher, she knew—in spite of everything—there would be no other decision for her.

She turned back to her companion and opened her mouth, but Joanne beat her to the punch, her words like olive branches weaving themselves around Magdalene, soothing yet unnecessary.

Standing there, arms slack, the Vacheron heavy on her wrist, the jasmine now stronger on her pulse points than in the air, Magdalene realized they were not at war.

“I was a coward back then, Headmistress.” Joanne hung her head. “And despite doing everything I could to remedy things when the next child came along, the fact remains, I didn't do anything to save you.”

Magdalene's smile tasted bitter on her lips. They had come full circle. Joanne had given up on her, rescued Sam in no small part as penance for her own lack of courage, and was now reverently calling Magdalene “Headmistress”...

“Fancied yourself a savior, Professor Dorsea?” Her sarcasm didn't reach its target, as Joanne simply nodded and averted her gaze. Magdalene sighed. Now that her own disinterest in any kind of revenge against this woman had become abundantly clear to her—the word itself sounding and feeling foolish altogether—she wanted to be alone. “I don't have any resentment towards you.”

It felt rather freeing to say it, even if Magdalene did not want to acknowledge it. She thought she had so much hatred in her, for anyone and everyone linked to Dragons. But looking at Joanne in this moment, she knew nothing remained except the tiredness of carrying around the heavy burden of being wronged. Yes, she had been wronged, but from where she stood now, it seemed moot to keep holding on to these emotions regarding this woman. After all, even if she could have done more, there'd been no way to save Magdalene back then.

When Joanne had turned her eyes back towards Magdalene in surprise, she'd allowed herself a short bark or laughter. "Yes, I know, rather shocking, all things considered. But no, there are no hard feelings. Or rather, not anymore. Hence, this is what we are going to do about this wretched situation of yours..."

MAGDALENE SHOOK her head back to the present and gripped the oaken desk in front of her. She really was going soft. What on earth was she doing? First the talk she'd had with Joanne on the damn cliff, and now this conversation with Sam.

Her grip tightened hard enough that her knuckles turned white, but the pain did nothing to lift the haze clouding her mind. A topic from their earlier conversation appeared like a lifeline, and she grabbed it.

"Yes, yes, you're all welcome, I'm sure. But can't you see that you seem to be fighting absolutely every single decision I propose? And I'm not even sure you understand why you're doing it. Tell me why the Houses are as 'essential' as you and everyone else seem to think?"

Magdalene sat down, rolled her chair closer to the window, and resumed tickling the cat's ear. Since she was acting so completely out of character, she figured she might as well go all the way.

Sam spoke, her voice measured, but there was emotion under the calm exterior, like deep waters ready to erupt into waves at any given moment.

As the sound washed over her, one word stood out. *Belong*. Sam spoke it with a closed-off expression, and Magdalene knew she had found her opening.

"Did you belong?" Even as she asked, Magdalene saw her question score the hit. Sam wrapped her arms around herself, and while she did not take a step back, it was clear she was shaken. Her mouth opened, but Magdalene had already smelled blood in the water. She was right about the damn Houses, and Sam was being stubborn because of that vaunted loyalty of hers, to brick, mortar, and antiquated foolishness.

"Your eyes are gray, Professor Threadneedle. How did you fit into whatever House they shoehorned you into? Sky Blue, I assume? Did you feel you belonged? And how about the girls with hazel eyes? And god forbid,

girls with heterochromia?”

At Magdalene so blatantly going for the kill by referencing her own eyes and her own exclusion, Sam dropped her chin and looked away. The old wound opened up, seeping ichor. And although Magdalene wanted to pull the punch, she couldn't quite make it painless. Still, the old practice was, from its inception, intended to discriminate.

“Here you are, defending Doctor Fenway's presence at the school to me, defending the scholarships, arguing that the school should accept and include and innovate, yet you are standing up for an archaic structure that excludes, divides, and pits students against each other.”

A choked sob was Magdalene's only answer. She wanted to reach out and wipe away that tears that escaped Sam's attempts to keep them at bay.

“Did you know that, in the pursuit of the soccer cup just last year, there were fifteen violent incidents between members of the different Houses? Or that, during the lacrosse competitions, the girls from Sky Blue and Amber got into over twenty altercations off the field? Bullying, verbal abuse, hazing. Is this the unity Three Dragons has been promoting? House over school loyalty?”

Of course Sam was aware of most of these incidents. As a Chair she had signed off on quite a number of the resulting punishments herself. Magdalene had seen that paperwork.

She realized her hands were trembling when the cat, clearly disturbed by the agitation, jumped off the windowsill. His hiss at Sam as he exited the office made her want to high-five him.

When Sam finally spoke again, it was the absolute wrong thing to say, under any and all circumstances. “The Old Dragonettes will not permit this to happen.”

Magdalene tsked. If this was Sam's last line of defense, it was an exceedingly poor one.

“Alden and Tullinger, Ohno and Rolffe, are the people who have to permit this to happen, Professor. They actually have the power to allow things. Believe me when I say I couldn't care less about the thousands of women who stood idly by when the school was sinking lower and lower on the national chart of private schools. Did you know that Dragons went from number one in the Northeast to dead last in every single denominator, academics, sports, everything in less than ten years?”

At Sam's weak nod, Magdalene lowered her tone, knowing that she had

won the war now, and there was no need to overwhelm the bested.

“The only bright spots on the school’s horizon were the awards the faculty kept receiving and the recognition they kept getting from the state and national education boards. And in the past three years, by faculty I mean you. You have single-handedly kept the school in the good news column, papering over the cracks of incompetence. And yet you sit here and argue that some women who descend on the island once a year—to get boozy and rowdy and break chairs and kitchenware down at Rowena’s Pub—are the reason I should not do whatever I deem necessary to drag the school out of the quagmire it has sunk into? Do you seriously think they are going to be the ones to stop me from doing what’s right?”

Sam’s eyes narrowed in a way Magdalene didn’t entirely appreciate. As she drummed her fingers on the ancient desk, she’d come to recognize that something was being left unsaid, something was being filed away. The woman really had no poker face to save her life, yet she didn’t know what factoid Sam had latched onto now.

“I accept that some of the reasons behind your proposal are reasonable—”

“Some? How generous of you, Professor.” Magdalene could not erase the sarcasm from her tone even if she tried. But Sam, of the narrowed eyes and determined expression, was already beating retreat.

“We agree that we disagree on this for the moment, Headmistress. Could we perhaps revisit?” When Sam hurried from the office with an air of such complete and utter determination that she might as well be on an official mission, Magdalene sighed and listened to her receding footsteps for a moment. The sight of the empty pillow made her unexpectedly long for the rotund orange furball to be lounging there so she could pet the silky ears once more.

She shook her head at her own bit of fancy, then squared her shoulders. Below, she caught sight of Sam fishing something out of her pocket. A familiar, rather sizable bright keychain gleamed in the morning sun. It belonged on a rusty set of keys to the basement of Sky Blue dormitory. Sam must have grabbed them from the custodians on her way out. Cat ears would have to wait and so would everything else. Those old doors lead to even older corridors underground, and there had always been only one room they’d concealed in the bowels of Sky Blue. And these days, that little hidden room kept Magdalene’s secret.

OF DANK BASEMENTS & KNIGHTS IN GINGER ARMOR

She did not run after Sam. That would have been the highest of indignities. The stubborn set of Sam's jaw earlier in her office told her everything Magdalene needed to know about the slightest possibility of stopping the infuriating woman. So it didn't really matter whether she ran. Plus, the odds of Sam finding what she was certainly looking for right away were slim.

So Magdalene took her time. She made a call to check on the progress of the audit she had ordered on some of the procurements she had her suspicions about. Nothing egregious, just more creative accounting from Fenway. But Magdalene wouldn't mind having proof in her pocket, just in case.

Then she proceeded to meticulously rearrange the papers on her desk. When she finally strolled down the hallway past George, who gave her an inquisitive look followed by, "If you're looking for Sam, I saw her walk in the direction of the Sky Blue dormitory. Oh, and Dorsea was on her heels," Magdalene decided she had given Sam enough of an opportunity. How hard could it be? How many Magdalenes were there at Dragons throughout the years, and how many were close to her age? Sam was very perspicacious. And with Joanne there, her task would be much easier.

She carefully made her way through the dank corridors. Surrounded by walls seeping moisture, coated with age-old mold, the darkness was interspersed with the glaring red exit lights, some half burnt-out and some completely devoid of their warning indicators. Magdalene gritted her teeth at the obviously shoddy work done when installing the safety features.

The raised voices that greeted her in front of the rusty door to the archive told her that maybe Sam was too smart for her own good.

“...you lot canned a sixteen-year-old kid for having bi-colored eyes?”

For once, Magdalene decided not to wait around the corner and stepped under the eerie red glow of one of those few still working exit signs—one of the few still working—just as Sam finished ranting. After all, Joanne had probably already said too much, and there was no need for Magdalene to hear those same old excuses.

“So is this where the precious personal information of students and faculty is kept? Seems rather careless, if not downright hazardous. It looks more like a den of iniquity. George said she saw you troop down here, and I thought I knew exactly why.”

Magdalene threw back her shoulders and didn't flinch when both Sam and Joanne jumped, caught in the act. With both women staring at her, Sam's cheeks turning crimson under her direct stare, Magdalene continued. She'd expected Sam to find the file, had even waited to give her every chance. What she hadn't counted on were the sordid details Joanne Dorsea could provide.

And judging by the haunted look on Joanne's face, she had indeed spilled plenty.

Magdalene felt weighted down, drowning really. The stones at her chest were heavy, and she'd been holding on to some of them for too long. She lifted her head and decided she might as well control the narrative and get ahead of the worst of it—even if the pain in her chest was making her dizzy.

“While my eye color was perhaps the most simple reason that could have been used to dismiss me from the school, Professor Threadneedle, it was my less than legitimate birth that was ultimately utilized as too big of a scandal for the deeply religious trustees, and my presence at the school was curtailed swiftly. A very conservative institution like Three Dragons, built on all those illustrious principles of having children inside the sanctity of marriage between one man and one woman, did not suffer *bastards*, Professor. Thirty years ago, it was kind of a big deal, certainly enough for the devout, good ole church-going trustees to vote unanimously to remove me from the school.”

She stepped farther into the musty room and was grateful for her perfume, the scent of jasmine once again rescuing her from the grime and stench of old memories.

“What Professor Dorsea is not telling you, is that soon after my so-called probationary term was terminated prematurely for the stated reason of me not being able to fit into any of the houses due to my ophthalmologic condition and, in actuality, for being a bastard...” She made the word roll off her

tongue, knowing the effect they had on Sam and Joanne, both of whom cringed again. Plus, some things were becoming increasingly clear to her.

While the truth was not yet something she was comfortable sharing with Sam—and she was fairly certain Joanne didn't know about Hilda and the real reason Magdalene had gotten the boot—Sam's own circumstances were like the proverbial dots, very easy to connect.

Magdalene folded her arms. “She and a few other teachers went on strike to make sure this never happened again. Didn't you, Professor Dorsea?”

Sam squinted, focused on counting off the math on her fingers, no doubt following the timeline. Her eyes widened and she stared at Magdalene. It didn't take a genius to figure out that, unbeknownst to her, Magdalene was the sacrificial lamb that had paved Sam's way at Dragons. When she finally looked up at Magdalene, her face was transformed.

“You mean when I was found?” Even the calm, quiet voice sounded shrill and detached in the dust rising in the air from the decaying shelves.

Joanne shifted uncomfortably and refused to raise her eyes.

“I did not fight for a sixteen-year-old sophomore whom nobody wanted at the school because she was questioning everything Dragons was built upon. Sure, she was starting to mobilize the students and to speak out against some of the most egregious things, but I still did not say a thing. Modern, positive, brave ideas are like birds, once you set them free, they are almost impossible to rein in afterwards. It was easy to dismiss her as a troublemaker and a bad influence on the other girls.”

Joanne took a steadying breath, yet her voice was still low and broken when she continued. “But the reason they gave when they got rid of her never sat right with me. Sam, I couldn't allow the trustees to simply throw children to the curb because they were orphans or came from single-parent households. It seems ridiculous these days. It's nothing to be ashamed of, it's something that happens every day. But back then...”

Joanne looked away with an agonized expression on her face. “It was a very big deal in this place at that time. Reverend Sanderson was still at Dragons, we still prayed twice a day... And so I let one child be tossed aside. But when you were found on the steps of the chapel, I couldn't allow it to happen again. I couldn't let them put you into an orphanage simply because you had no parents. Foundling or not, orphan or not, we had to make sure history did not repeat itself. You belonged at Dragons. We went on strike, Ruth and myself, and most of the others. To our great surprise, we weren't

fired, and the trustees caved in quickly enough with Alden and Tullinger volunteering to take care of the legal side of things. And so we kept you at the school.”

Sam’s gaze flicked from Magdalene to Joanne in complete shock, and Magdalene wanted to hug her. Hold her close and not let go of the trembling body that stood so vulnerable, so defenseless in the onslaught of the incoming facts. But at the same time, that naiveté, that lack of understanding of how the world worked, coupled with loyalty to this place, stung. Hadn’t she been trying to tell Sam all along that she was not the enemy? And on top of that, her own heart was also bleeding for the sixteen-year-old who had been discarded. After all, Sam, despite all the hurt, had been allowed to stay.

“Well, this is so heartwarming, that when faced with the massive strike of its faculty, the trustees decided to change the less-than-savory rule of ‘no bastards’ and to finally move the school from the swamp of their religious prejudices of the 19th century into the modern era. So, in a sense, yes, Sam Threadneedle, I crawled so you could run. No need to thank me.” As parting shots went, it was a good one.

As an afterthought, she snatched her folder from Sam’s hands. She could swear it burned her fingers to the point where she could almost feel their tips catch fire as they closed over the old paper, the dust of decomposition leaving stains on her skin.

Rounding a corner, Magdalene clutched the file to her chest as her breathing shallowed. Her eyes flitted around, seeking purchase. For the life of her, she couldn’t remember this particular hallway.

“A wrong turn, it was just a wrong turn,” she whispered to herself, trying to suppress the panic. *She’d find her way in a moment...*

Leaning back against the chalky, moldy old wall, she heard her own breath catch on a sob and she knew... She knew she was lost. Somewhere in her flight, in her wish to escape, to not hold on to the damn file, to not hold on to anything, to not even be here, surrounded by this stone and mortar, by the rotting wood and corroded iron, she’d taken a damned wrong turn.

One... Two... Three...

The counting did fuck all to soothe her, and the panic began to choke her. Her fingers, the ones not burned by the file still clenched in her hand, clawed at her blouse trying to open the small buttons that bound the collar together.

Four... Five...

Her vision grayed at the edges, and she knew she was about to pass out.

Jesus, one little encounter with her past and she was falling to pieces.

She closed her eyes and—

Meow!

Something warm and furry brushed against her naked ankle.

Meow!

A pair of paws reached up and patted against her knee, clinging to the skirt, tugging her down to the cat's level, and when Magdalene—tired and faint—crouched, the cat simply bumped his massive head against her shoulder. Once, twice, three times. When she let out another sob, her tears flowing freely now, she grabbed at him, hiding her face in his warm fur, allowing his soft purrs and meows to cover her crying.

Steps sounding in the distance much later told her Joanne and Sam had left the basement and pointed her to the way out.

She stood up. The cat... No, *Willoughby*, sat back on his haunches—a favorite pose—with his tail wrapped around his front paws and watched her as if assessing whether she was presentable enough to show herself to the world again.

Magdalene rolled her eyes at him, and he tilted his head to the side. “Yes, I know I need to hurry if I don't want us to be locked up in this basement.” Willoughby looked like he wouldn't enjoy such torment either. Despite—or maybe because of—the generous amount of mice she knew inhabited the space.

No, he was not a basement cat. Nor was he a mouser, no matter what his lofty title said.

“If you and I are to be friends, and if you are to advance farther into my room than the pillow on the floor, we shall have to make a little trip to the vet, Mister.”

The answering meow was disgruntled. Whether he didn't approve of the vet, or of the title, she didn't know. But she made a mental note to make an appointment with the town veterinarian, nonetheless.

BY THE TIME evening rolled around, Magdalene found she had thirteen missed calls. The spotty reception on the island gave her an excuse to leave her phone in her office most of the time anyway, and today she'd made

herself be anywhere except the damn space that, in her mind, still smelled like mothballs.

Damn Fenway.

Before she headed for the cliff, Magdalene picked up her cell with some trepidation. But nothing stood out, most of the calls were from Timothy and the rest from Joel. Well, it was late and her day was over. She needed solace. And only one place could offer her that on this island.

Sir Willoughby, as she now thought of the cat—after his gallant rescue and comforting her earlier—fell into step next to her, and she smiled at his half purr as they walked the darkening school grounds.

Her smile bloomed fully when she noticed that her safe space wasn't unoccupied. And wasn't it remarkable in and of itself that she no longer felt possessive of the Amber Cliff? The fact that her secret was now known to Sam was a comfort and she surprised herself by wanting to open up more.

Although in the back of her mind, as she watched Willoughby prance over to Sam and bump into her side with his large head, Magdalene knew there was only one person and one person alone with whom she didn't mind sharing either the cat or her favorite spot on the island.

"I spent my evenings right here, in this very spot during my short stay at Dragons, Professor Threadneedle. Tell me, was it my knowledge of the best hiding spots that gave away my history with the school?"

Sam didn't turn around, but neither did she flinch, which meant that, despite not being able to see Magdalene, she'd known who was approaching. The fact that Sam had recognized her steps gave Magdalene's heart a jolt.

"You have a way of speaking about Dragons, both the place and the Academy, in precisely the correct terms. It's never 'The Dragons' with you, rarely 'The Three Dragons' despite it being the official name, it's almost always just 'Dragons.' And yes, you know of Rowena's and of the perfect hiding spot on top of this cliff. Plus, Joanne talked of you in ways that one doesn't unless they know the person at least in passing."

So she knew the name of the local watering hole. Such a small thing. Yet it was a piece of the puzzle for Sam—a puzzle that had given Magdalene away. She tilted her head, giving Sam a long once over. "My, you are a veritable Jessica Fletcher and Miss Marple all in one, Professor."

Magdalene finally reached her destination and pulled out a blanket. She sat, leaving enough space for Willoughby who trotted over and made himself comfortable next to her, one gentle paw unobtrusively touching her thigh. He

was asleep within seconds. Something she did not yet wish to define grew warmer in Magdalene's heart.

When she looked up, Sam was smiling at her, her eyes so full of mirth that Magdalene rolled her eyes. She did have a reputation to uphold, after all.

"I tried to dissuade him. But he seems to have made up his mind and refuses to stop stalking me."

"Oh yes," Sam laughed. "The poor, almighty Headmistress is powerless to stop a cat from following her and from obviously adoring her. Not only does he shadow you, breaking his infamous routine, he also allows you to touch him, which was anathema for this ginger boy just weeks ago. You must have a magic touch."

Sam blushed a deep crimson and snapped her mouth shut before turning away, stopping Magdalene from blurting out any variety of improper things that were on the tip of her tongue.

Still, when she finally did speak, it wasn't anything she'd actually meant to voice out loud.

"What is it about you that I find myself willing to endure your total rudeness and all this jumping to conclusions and expecting the absolute worst from me, and yet I still enjoy your company?"

Sam's shoulders tensed, and she wrapped her arms around herself with what Magdalene was coming to recognize as a characteristic pose. Defensive? Scared? Maybe both.

"This school is the only home I've ever known. It wasn't always hospitable, or kind, or even welcoming to me. But Dragons was always there. And it raised me, through thick and thin."

Ah, definitely both then. Defensive, scared, yet truthful as well.

"And does this love and adoration of brick and mortar prohibit you from seeing that Dragons requires massive changes to allow the school to keep pace with the times?"

Sam bit her lip before slowly letting it go and schooling her features. "You talk about modern times, yet you ordered the restoration of the chapel which was quasi-abandoned for years. You talk about reform yet you closed down half the clubs—"

"Three-quarters of those, I believe." Magdalene's mouth twitched, yet the evening breeze made her shiver. As if sensing her chill, Willoughby moved closer to her, his whole back now warming her thigh.

"If he wasn't so cute, I'd regret all the scraps I've fed him from the

faculty table. The traitor.” Sam’s attempt at humor did nothing to soften the blow as the hit landed. Even in teasing, Sam still drew the lines of demarcation in such a way that they were on different sides. Magdalene felt her cheeks heat, a disturbing sensation of betrayal despite this woman owing her no allegiance. And on the heels of that betrayal came annoyance. At herself mostly. At how stubbornly her heart kept wishing Sam Threadneedle would choose her.

“Oh, don’t take it out on the cat. You have made it very clear that you believe I want to dismantle Dragons brick by ancient brick, so I’m not sure I am capable of disabusing you of the notion, Professor Threadneedle.”

Sam’s eyes blazed with something akin to anger, and Magdalene held her breath, the sight in front of her halting it. With the cliff at her back, her hair in disarray around the narrow face, and that sinful mouth full and crimson, Sam was magnificent.

All fury in motion, a storm brewing in those cloudy eyes, ready to make landfall at any moment. But when it did hit, Magdalene suddenly wished she hadn’t baited her.

“And why do you persist in calling me that? We had sex, for Christ’s sake, surely you can call me by my first name!”

Well, Sam was many things. But she was also unflinchingly honest. Even if it meant Magdalene was left with questions, the answers to which she had no desire to give. Yet under the light of that tempest, she felt that she had to.

“That would be unprofessional of me, Professor.”

Sam’s face, as open and honest as her words, gave away how Magdalene’s little whispered confession doused that burning rage dead. She stood, the slim shoulders slumped and her eyes desolate before she took a few steps away. Not that there was anywhere in particular to go.

Judging by the clouds in the distance, the island would soon be engulfed in a storm, one that would certainly match whatever was raging inside both of them. And they’d retire for the night, alone with what ate at them and what warmed them and what confused them.

A sudden sound behind her had Magdalene whirl around, pulled from her musings in fear of having been overheard. Surely, enough time had passed between Sam’s outburst and the arrival of whomever was skulking about in the dark?

When George revealed herself near the jasmine bushes, looking sheepish, Magdalene exhaled sharply. The expression on George’s face was nothing

out of the ordinary, so Magdalene brushed away the earlier concern as no more than a piece of lint on her skirt. Willoughby raised his head, but didn't growl at the intruder. If George was surprised at the company Magdalene kept—either of them—she didn't say. Smiling broadly, she approached.

“Been searching high and low for this one. Finally remembered about this place. You're being urgently summoned to the office, Headmistress.”

At Magdalene's questioning eyebrow, George grimaced.

“The trustees are having a conniption over the Houses proposal, and your ex-husband is here in person.”

Magdalene suppressed an eye roll. “Ah, they made him abandon his undoubtedly important pursuits in Boston and return to the island to stay my hand from cutting off the dragons' heads. Some of them really should have gone into acting, for all the drama and theatrics they stage.”

Well, there went her plans for whiskey and brooding.

With George heading off towards the school ahead of her, Magdalene rose swiftly and carefully picked up Willoughby, setting him back on the ground as she shook out the blanket, before draping it over Sam's shoulders with care. She knew she'd probably regret showing her hand this much, since the gesture was so uncharacteristic for her. There was no question it also didn't follow her earlier protestation about being professional.

But the wind was cold and cutting, another harbinger of impending storm, and Sam was only wearing a thin shirt and after all—somewhat to her regret—Magdalene was not made of stone.

As she started towards the school, Willoughby yawned, growled in clear displeasure, but proceeded to fall in step with her again.

She did not look back to see Sam's face in the moonlight as she threw, “It's rather chilly here tonight. Stay warm,” over her shoulder. At Sam's soft sigh of pleasure, Magdalene shivered.

So much for professional detachment.

OF MISSED CALLS & STEAMY SHOWERS

*B*y the time she made it back to her office, the storm clouds had enveloped the island. She could see the tempest outside the window as she leaned against the doorframe and cleared her throat to get the attention of the man currently occupying her space.

Timothy, standing with his back ramrod straight and his hands playing with her phone, abandoned as it had been on the desk, heard her come in but didn't turn around. Instead, he wiggled the phone next to his body, making sure she could see him holding it like a wagging finger in her direction.

"So you've seen my missed calls, and you decided to—"

"Just ignore them."

She made her way to her desk and took a seat, the massive piece of furniture now a centuries-old barrier between them.

"I knew you weren't calling to compliment my choice of outfit, Timothy."

His lips twitched as she expected them to, and his demeanor swung away from irritation. Not that she couldn't deal with him when he was in one of his darker moods, but she'd had a long day, and she didn't need his sulkiness to add to it.

"More's the pity, because you look amazing." His eyes traveled the length of her body, supine in her chair, and it was Willoughby's growl that interrupted the perusal she no longer found offensive.

Apparently her cat did? Funny how she started thinking of him as 'hers.' The tom proceeded with his customary jump onto the windowsill pillow, and his little snarls in Timothy's direction compelled Magdalene to reach out and trace the line of his ear. That seemed to pacify him.

When she turned back to her visitor, Timothy's face was clouded, eyes shadowed, and the thin line of his mouth set.

Sulk it is then...

"You're here to tell me that the board is miffed?"

She leaned forward and plucked the phone out of his hand.

"I wouldn't be quite so dismissive of those people, Magdalene. They are more than 'miffed'. There are things at stake here that you and I quite plainly do not understand—"

"Oh, I understand them very well. You are forgetting I spent some time in these hallowed halls. I know what's at stake."

Timothy scoffed and finally took off his sports coat.

"I still can't comprehend why you are hiding your past."

"I am not actually. Well, not anymore. Sam knows."

The moment the name was out of her mouth, she regretted it. Even though the day had been hellish, and there were so many things about it that she would change if she could, if she had one choice, it would be this. This one tiny word. Three letters. *Sam*.

It put that longing look in Timothy's eyes. The kind that never led to anything good and always cost her. As his face contorted with yearning, she stood and went to him, halting mere inches away.

"Timothy..."

"I should have held you tighter, kissed you longer—"

She stopped his hand that was reaching for her face and clasped it in her own.

"Tim." His eyes filled with tears at the sound of the nickname she, and only she, used to call him before their marriage had started to turn sour. "We weren't happy. Happy people do not hurt each other the way we did."

She chose not to dwell on the fact that she had given that relationship her best—or the very best she knew how to give at the time.

"I..." He faltered and she let go of his hand. They'd been having this conversation for years. Maybe she needed to be just a touch more assertive, since he seemed to have become immune to her usual reasons.

"We were not happy, Timothy. We simply didn't know better. We were stumbling in the dark. And once we spilled some light into our marriage, it did what light always does. Streamed through all the cracks and exposed all the flaws."

He rocked back on his heels, and for a fraction of a moment, she felt sorry

for him. But the scene that always tended to play in front of her eyes when she had even an inkling of pity for him—of walking into their bedroom to find him deep inside his secretary—accomplished what it always did. It jolted her out of the melancholy and out of the last vestiges of sympathy she had for him. He loved her. She occasionally had use of him and, despite his transgression, she trusted him. After all these years, he was still one of the few people of whom she knew exactly what to expect. That was their relationship, when all was said and done.

Her phone rang again, jarring her from her musings, and she could see Joel's number flash at her with angry brightness. Well, he was a pain, but he had great timing. She really didn't want to continue this conversation with Timothy tonight.

"Since you practically accused me of not doing what's good for me, let me take this and spare us any further unpleasantness on the subject of Houses." Turning away from him, she pressed 'answer' and left the office.

THE CALL WAS melodramatic to say the least. Joel had Ohno with him and the two were attempting a quite amateurish version of good cop, bad cop—except both of them were just awful people. And she was exhausted.

So she hummed her way through 45 minutes of nonsensical arguments and incoherent thoughts before bidding the trustees a good night.

No, the issue of the Houses wasn't going anywhere, as she had so flippantly assured Timothy. But then had she ever believed it would? Something this ingrained, this deeply embedded, was going to haunt her. She flicked a piece of lint off her skirt. After all, she had been haunted and hunted before, continued to be, despite the phone calls receding recently. So what was one more thing? The thought, even un verbalized, tasted bitter on her tongue and she chased it away, forcing her mind to return to the goddamn Houses and what problem they really presented.

With her thoughts on the task at hand, she slowly made her way back to her office, only to hear angry raised voices coming from inside. For once, and quite uncharacteristically, George was missing from her usual post at her desk, where she could be found at all hours, workaholic that she was.

And so Magdalene found herself standing in front of the closed door

trying to discern who Timothy was screaming at, ready to save whomever—perhaps even George herself, since the two never did get along—from her ex-husband’s misplaced wrath.

But it wasn’t George, and Magdalene’s heart sank as Timothy hissed yet again.

“But why do you care so much? Why does Magdalene’s past interest you so much? Got yourself a crush on the Headmistress?”

Sam’s steady voice gave no ground.

“Everything about the school interests me. And Ms. Nox, as you said, is the Headmistress.” Magdalene wanted to laugh at how expertly Sam had boxed Timothy in with her inflection on the ‘Ms.’ instead of ‘Mrs.’ She could almost see the vein pop on Timothy’s forehead. “If you think I won’t use every advantage I can to salvage what can be salvaged from her cutting and chopping Dragons, you’re insane. My feelings for the Headmistress are irrelevant. The school is what’s essential.”

Magdalene recoiled. She had never been slapped in her life, but this right here felt exactly like what she imagined a palm across the face would. And on the heels of pain came shame.

Hadn’t she been admonishing herself for weeks now over her infatuation with someone whose loyalties were so clearly split? Sam may have still been lusting after her, but she had always made her priorities known. And Magdalene had no one but herself to blame for her ridiculous affection for this woman who’d probably rather see her thrown off the Amber Cliff than succeed as Headmistress.

Too bad...

She pushed the door open, unwilling to allow the conversation to go further. After all, she had heard enough.

“Well, now that we have cleared all that up, Timothy, the room you’ve been assigned in the teachers’ quarters is at your disposal, since you are about to miss the last ferry, and Professor Threadneedle, despite all your scheming to gain and press an advantage, surely it’s past your bedtime.”

She could see Sam flinch as she spun around to see Magdalene in the doorway. Willoughby, the only one to stand by her these days, sat back on his haunches. When she glanced down at him, he was glaring daggers at both Sam and Timothy. Why had she been so wary of cats in the past?

Sam’s face was a study of contriteness and embarrassment. Magdalene wanted to wave her away and dismiss her; from the room, from her thoughts.

After all, there was nothing to be ashamed of. People had hated her all her life, no matter where she went and where she worked. This was nothing new. Perhaps the novelty was in the pain that this particular instance was currently causing.

Magdalene closed her eyes for a second and took a steadying breath. They weren't fated lovers, bound by some fairytale romance. They'd had sex. It was done. Time for both of them to move forward, since all they managed to do otherwise was step all over each other's toes in their endeavor to disregard what they'd shared.

Her decision made—and she'd never failed at anything, so forgetting Manhattan was pretty much a done deal where she was concerned—Magdalene raised an eyebrow at the two people still shuffling their feet in her office.

“I assume you're here to hound me some more about my barbaric methods of reform and, particularly, my bloodlust for the Houses, Professor Threadneedle. The trustees expressed the same sentiment to me earlier, and Timothy is here in person to impress upon me the error of my ways. Still, it is my decision and my decision alone. Not yours, not the Old Dragonettes', who are already mounting some ridiculous form of protest. The Board gave me absolute power for a year to turn Dragons around and away from ruin. I'll let all of you know what I decide by the beginning of the school year. Now—”

Loud screams from the hallway interrupted her, and she whipped around.

“Headmistress! Magdalene! I can't find Sam. Come quick.” Joanne's hoarse voice ceased when she reached the threshold and almost stumbled, clutching a hand to her chest when she saw Sam. “Oh, thank goodness, Sammy, you're here. It's Lily!”

As Joanne explained, her breathing grew ragged. Sam grabbed her and the pair took off running, all before Magdalene could get her bearings.

Fuck.

She set off in pursuit of Sam, with Timothy faithfully at her heels. For once, she didn't mind. If something had happened to the girl, she'd need his gym-honed brawn.

BY THE TIME the two of them reached Sam and Joanne in the faculty quarters,

Sam was crouching in front of her own door next to Lily who was holding her ankle with a pained expression. Her breathing was shallow, coming out in small whines and pants.

The lights overhead were off, and with the faint glow coming in from the outside lamp post, Sam was trying to ask questions about what had happened, but Magdalene tuned her out. Her feet were wet, the tiles under her heels slippery. She instinctively raised her head to the ceiling. Surely a pipe leak, since the rain hadn't started yet? But as she squinted at the old whitewashed rafters, they were dry with no visible water damage.

A hand on her shoulder startled her.

"The last ferry is gone. It's halfway to the mainland by now. And with Nurse Trufault no longer at the school... Does the village have a doctor? I called Joel, as per procedure—" George's voice right next to her ear came out in loud pants as her secretary tried to catch her breath.

Magdalene wanted to shake some of that efficiency out of George. "You called Joel about this? And Trufault wouldn't do us any good right now. Not only would she probably prescribe leeches or bloodletting, the incompetent fool, she'd not be here anyway, since she takes summers off."

Lily's small sob shook her out of her displeasure, and she knelt in the water by her side. Even in the dimness of the outside lamp, she could see that the girl was pale as a sheet and shivering. Magdalene gingerly held the trembling hand and cast her eyes to the weirdly bent ankle. Hopefully it was just a bad sprain and not broken.

Poor kiddo...

With everyone else standing around and wringing their hands, Magdalene wanted to growl. She would have if she thought it would have spurred any of them into action.

"Sam, there was always a doctor in the village. Last I remember, it was old Franz..."

Sam's brow furrowed. "His son is the family practitioner now. He still lives in his father's house. He doesn't attend to the school's cases much, and I'm not sure how he would even get up the cliffs..."

And now Magdalene actually gnashed her teeth.

"Damn this backwater place and their refusal to finally connect the school and the town with a drivable road!" All eyes turned to Magdalene, blinking at her outburst. She lifted a hand in a pacifying gesture.

"George, Joanne, somebody? Do you have your phone on you? Call

Franz Jr. or whatever name he goes by. We might need to send Lily to the mainland if it's more than a clean break or if it's more complicated than he can deal with. Oh, and get in touch with any of the fishermen. If she needs a boat at this hour, one of them will help us out." She looked around and when her ex-husband came into view, Magdalene allowed her shoulders to relax a bit. "Timothy, help us carry her outside so the doctor won't need to come up. I don't think sitting in all this water is doing her any good."

Everyone had their orders, and as Timothy moved to bend down to pick up Lily, Magdalene leaned in close to the girl.

"Imagine all the care and coddling you will get when this is all over, missy."

The tease landed her the wobbly smile she'd been aiming for. The girl was holding up admirably, and Magdalene was really proud of her.

Once Timothy held Lily safely in his arms, mindful of her injuries, he carried her outside with Sam's assistance. Joanne got out her phone and, trying to beat the spotty reception, dialed the doctor, which she should have done in the first place, instead of running around the school looking for Magdalene.

THE ENTIRE EXPERIENCE with Franz at the clinic left her seething. He seemed competent, at first glance and by all accounts, and the ankle was just sprained. But Magdalene shuddered to think what would have happened if things had been more serious. By the time they returned to Dragons, her anger was boiling just under the surface.

As if Lily hadn't been through enough already with the fall, of all the places to encounter transphobia, the medical field really shouldn't be one. Still, she wondered why she was surprised to begin with. These days, you just never knew. Bigotry of all kinds simply flourished unchecked. It hit home that Sam's decision to stay in the closet was perhaps the correct one considering the people at this school and on this island.

Magdalene made a mental note to look into medical care options, dig deeper into Frantz, since he was the only provider on the island and made some decisions for future incidents.

SHE LEFT Lily with Sam so she could make sure the girl was comfortable in her new quarters in the faculty wing that had been assigned to her while she recovered. Then she made a quick point of checking the dormitories and speaking to the few other girls who spent their summers at the school. Giving them the news in the most soothing manner possible, she managed to calm down some of them, reassured others, and made sure Lily's girlfriend, Amanda, knew where to find her.

Girlfriend...

Magdalene hid a smile. Some things did change, even if the aforementioned bigotry still flourished on Dragons. And among those things was young love. And bravery. Things she herself thought she had once, things Sam had been careful to keep away from prying eyes all her life, things these girls were so proud and so free in showing. It was heartwarming.

It was also very loud, as Amanda had a thousand questions and so did the rest of the girls, and in the overall hubbub and anxiety of the students, Magdalene felt jittery and exhausted. They were all lovely. And very noisy.

After making a quick round through the building, under the excuse of ensuring that everyone was in bed and safe, Magdalene found herself back at Sam's door. The site of the accident was clean now, all indicators that anything occurred here, gone. She thought to chastise herself for creeping around but ran out of time as the person she absolutely wasn't waiting for rounded the corner.

"We need to talk about what happened, Professor Threadneedle."

Well, as opening salvos went, this one was perhaps not her crowning glory, but how was she to know she would end up here, of all places?

Good thing you're not wearing pants, Magdalene... They'd be on fire by now.

This time, the voice in her head sounded suspiciously like Candace catching her with her hand in the cookie jar.

"What happened?" Sam stared at her, blinking. Her obvious confusion really shouldn't be this endearing. And yet it was not just that; it also reminded her of that desperately attractive, raw honesty evident on Sam's face—back in Manhattan, and here, yet again. It gave her solace. It gave her succor, even if it made her think of all the things she really shouldn't want as

much as she did.

“Water on slippery tiles and the lights not working in the whole corridor? You think there is nothing to talk about? The custodians replaced the bulbs, by the way—all three of them—and as you can see, everything is back to normal.”

Sam’s color drained. Had it not occurred to Sam that there was zero other explanation for the events of the evening but deliberate sabotage? The thought alone made her stomach twist, and not at all in a pleasurable way. Yet Sam seemed entirely oblivious to her being the potential target of that very sabotage.

“You think somebody tried to hurt Lily?”

“Considering that it all happened in front of your door, I don’t think that the intended victim was supposed to be Lily at all. Wrong time and wrong place for her, though.”

Sam struggled a bit with the lock to her apartment, the long fingers gripping the key trembling slightly. Magdalene struggled to look. Yet she knew those fingers, had felt them on her skin, had them trace her curves, felt them inside her...

A change of subject then. And fast. Safer for both of them.

“How is she?” Magdalene’s words came out slightly lower than intended. Perhaps she was standing too close in her quest to, under no circumstances, look at or admire Sam’s hands as they continued to grapple with the lock. The faint scent of lily of the valley wrapped itself around her like a lover. Magdalene tugged on her collar surreptitiously. The corridor was rather stuffy, wasn’t it?

“You mean how is she now versus when you saw her three minutes ago?” Sam’s words were sass itself, but the color rising up her collar and the heat radiating from her spoke of an entirely different emotion.

“I admit, I was rather too distracted by the neanderthal at the clinic to pay attention to what he had to say. I wanted to throttle him the whole time we were there.”

Magdalene suppressed a laugh. Instead, she swallowed hard and tried not to focus on how both of them were ignoring the elephant in the hallway, while dancing around the subject with all these entirely inane questions and answers.

When Sam finally won her battle with the lock, Magdalene pushed into the room, letting Sam follow her as she stalked towards the window. She

knew she was being too forward. As she stared into the darkness behind the glass, she saw neither the window nor the shadows beyond it. Her being in Sam's apartment like this was certainly inappropriate, and she hadn't even asked permission.

The evening was one of ups and downs, a rollercoaster ride at dizzying speed. All this desire be damned, she was shaken, her breath coming out in soft whooshes she was desperate to control. She was not going to cry.

"She's just a child. And he almost refused to treat her."

Behind her, all sound stopped. She must have shocked her host. Then Sam cleared her throat, though her voice still sounded bewildered when she spoke.

"You know, I think since you came to Dragons, I've spent way too much time trying to pick my jaw up off the floor. You do all these things, making cuts everywhere, chopping and changing, and ruthlessly throwing people out... You threaten the scholarship girls' presence here, yet then you try to strangle the doctor who dared look at Lily sideways. I don't understand you, Magdalene Nox."

Magdalene took her time turning around, needing every moment to school her features—and to prepare herself for Sam's. When she saw the raw hunger in those burning eyes that always gave their owner away no matter what game was being played, she allowed words to fall off her tongue unrestrained.

"I think you've been surprised by me a bit longer than just the past three weeks."

Magdalene had no recollection of taking a step, much less several, but she suddenly found herself closer to Sam, and the air between them regained that quality it had had from the first time their eyes met... Charged.

"I still have no idea why you even looked at me back in New York."

Sam didn't break eye contact, the gaze palpable, holding her in place with the sheer power of its honesty and desire. Because Sam was, as always, forthright, and despite the words, despite the sentiment behind them, Magdalene knew Sam wanted her. It made Magdalene feel invincible.

She threw her head back and laughed, and when she met Sam's eyes again, that naked desire in them made her knees weak.

"A gorgeous blonde, alone at a bar, adorable in how out of place and awkward she looked and probably felt, was finally getting the courage to send me a drink... No, I have no idea why I paid you even one jot of

attention that night.”

Sam’s eyes drew together. “So you spoke to me because I was so awkward and pitiful?”

“Yes, yes, all charity on my part.” Magdalene bit her lip, desperately trying to hide her amusement. But despite an earnest attempt to combat the joy, it won out, and the smile blossomed. To Magdalene's great delight, Sam's features softened instantly as she tilted her head, her disarmament obvious. *Good.* It was high time she had the upper hand.

Carefully, as if the skin under her fingertips might shatter at the touch, she lifted said hand, and slowly, tenderly traced Sam’s jaw from ear to chin. Sam shivered, the reaction so sudden, so unexpected—that despite knowing she still affected this woman—Magdalene felt an answering shudder run up her spine.

Sam tilted her head slightly, and Magdalene was certain she would lean into the caress, her breath coming in shallow inhalations now, but instead, Sam’s eyes pierced her with earnestness.

“I apologize about before... What you overheard with Timothy.” Did it feel imperative now, with Magdalene’s hand on her skin, for Sam to tell the truth? To make sure Magdalene knew she wasn’t conniving? There wasn’t any need. Sam may have her loyalties split, and Magdalene could not fully trust her, but she always knew where they stood. They had been that honest with each other. They were both aware it would be a fair fight.

So she didn’t stop her fingertips from gently brushing the line of Sam’s jaw, in a whisper of a caress, before reaching her mouth and tracing the lower lip. Sam’s tongue peeked out and licked at her skin. Startled, aroused, Magdalene gasped and dropped her hand.

This was too much... Too close!

Magdalene took a step to the side, putting distance between them, aware she was effectively breaking the moment.

She needed to say something. And she needed to run away, because she wanted to stay entirely too much. And on top of absolutely every reason to leave, was one she had rarely considered. Their power imbalance. Her earlier errant thought about the inappropriateness of being in Sam’s room returned tenfold.

Magdalene lowered her eyes as she took a few steps towards the door. “About before... No apologies necessary. We do what we must. And please think about what happened in the hallway. Something doesn’t quite add up.

Let's regroup soon, I'll want your opinion on what can be done about this before I make a decision about involving the authorities."

"The authorities?"

"With Joel already informed—and damn George for being so efficient—I'd like to follow up on what just happened here, Sam."

With a backward glance, Magdalene stopped at the door and turned around. The vision that was Sam, standing forlorn, backlit by the moonlight, flushed and so damn tempting, all the while completely oblivious, it seemed, to her own effect on Magdalene—it was absolutely deadly.

So she lowered her voice to that register that had undone Sam in Manhattan, before indulging in one more inappropriate moment. After all, she was racking up so many, what was one more? "You shouldn't doubt your effect on people, Sam Threadneedle. It is quite devastating when all is said and done."

And just like that, with the whisper of Sam's mouth still on her fingers, Magdalene left, running away from Sam and from herself.

EXCEPT, as it turned out, running from herself proved extremely difficult. For one, she didn't have very far to go. Her quarters were in the same building. And secondly, the brightness of the hallways, now that the lights were back on, was just too much of an assault on her senses.

With the storm outside cutting all other avenues for distraction, Magdalene returned to her apartment. The cat, ever faithful now, sat in front of her door, his face a study of patience.

Once inside, Magdalene, like Sam in her own place, didn't bother with the overhead lights and instead lit a candle, deciding it suited her mood better, before settling Willoughby on the pillow on the floor by her bed. She took her clothes off and slid on her satin robe, the material lush, caressing her skin—and doing absolutely nothing to quench the raw, abraded feeling she was left with after touching Sam.

A glance towards the bathroom told her what she needed, since sleep would be a long time coming with desire gnawing at her.

Magdalene let the robe fall to the floor, and stepped under the chilling spray of the shower, trying to empty her mind of the events of the day that

just ran like a film, scenes, moments chasing each other, becoming a beehive of noise and anxiety in her mind.

Anger, worry, sadness, and most of all desire—sheer burning desire—tugged at her thoughts, and when she ran the loofa over her breasts, she knew she wouldn't be able to escape herself tonight.

She reached over and turned the faucet to much warmer.

Decision made, there would be no need for the cold anymore. Her blood sung with need and anticipation. It had been too long. As her hands caressed her neck, moving slowly, her heart sped up with anticipation, and she thought back to the last time she'd touched herself. It had been an eternity ago, before Sam... *Sam*.

One word, one name, and the pulse under her fingertips spiked. Her breathing deepened, the hot water now scorching, lashing her with memory after memory of Manhattan.

Dammit. As she squeezed a nipple, hard then harder, she tried to dislodge the images rushing her. Hadn't she just promised herself to not think of Manhattan anymore? Hadn't she just told herself that Sam taking her apart over and over was never to be thought of again? That thinking about her mastering Magdalene entirely—before surrendering to her with equal abandon on her knees, completely defenseless and holding nothing back—simply had to stop?

Teasing her breasts was no longer enough; not when she couldn't stop reliving the caresses, the kisses, the little nips and harder bites from that night. She closed her eyes, touching the place where one of those very bites had left a perfect imprint on her upper thigh. That mark had stayed with her for a week, and she'd touched it every single day, getting wet every time she did so.

Wet... With water falling around her, she slowly traced the outside of her lips, feeling the excitement, the pent up arousal coat her fingers, and could wait no more...

She'd teased herself too much. The day had worn her out and Sam had finally undone her. As her fingers circled tighter and tighter around her clit, she thought of that tongue as it had leisurely caressed her fingertips—the same tongue that had delved in and out, that had tormented her with flicks long and slow, short and quick, alternating, driving her mad. Mad enough that she'd begged, and she had never begged before.

She heard her own long moan, her thighs trembling, her orgasm near, and

she allowed herself to finally plunge two fingers inside, remembering how Sam had destroyed her with that unerring precision of hitting her exactly where she needed it time and again in New York. On Dragons, it was one stroke, two and Magdalene came by her own hand.

If it was Sam's name on her lips, she was quiet enough not to hear it. Or so she told herself.

OF ROTTEN FLOWERS & RE- OPENING WOUNDS

The flowers started showing up soon after...

The first arrangement was pretty well massacred. Roses. Black ones. Chopped within an inch of their lives. The note could have used more imagination, or so Magdalene thought at the time. She tried dismissing it as a prank. She really did. But that little something inside her that sensed the wolf's eyes on her didn't allow it. And so she'd feigned a lack of concern, despite her heart stilling for a bit and her hands trembling as she waved away her secretary.

George had been quite upset, but Magdalene merely instructed her to trash the vase and its contents.

The second bouquet wasn't cut up as much as it was dried and mangled. The note was even more malicious, and she'd struggled to suppress her gasp when she read it. David Uttley had been with her, and she refused to give that man the satisfaction of seeing her flustered.

She did not like him. His obvious pursuit of Sam aside, she never dealt well with strange, silent types. And she had distinct difficulties setting his infatuation with Sam aside to begin with. So they mostly orbited each other from a distance.

Under no circumstances would she allow this particular man to see her fear. Not that she was scared. But the words coupled with the cruelty unleashed on the innocent plants were downright vicious.

Uttley gave her a long stare out of those bluish, strangely pale eyes when she placed the note in a clear plastic bag, but in his usual manner, said very little. Which creeped her out even more. Surely, one would have a comment one way or another when faced with such senseless violence. Yet apparently,

David Uttley was unperturbed.

Even more strangely, after that, the notes stopped. The flowers, however, did not. Neither did other odd and disgusting surprises in the form of dead rats and assorted mangled critters.

Willoughby's reaction to their appearance was always far worse than her own. Once, he'd simply dropped onto the ground in what Magdalene imagined was a feline form of fainting. So him being responsible for bringing her the spoils of war was out of the question.

One look in the direction of his rather plump body and pristinely groomed fur told her what she'd known well beforehand: This tom did not wage any battles.

It all was unsettling, but just as with the numerous phone calls and threatening emails from an assortment of the concerned public, parents, alumni, former teachers, and other busybodies, nothing would stop Magdalene from her mission. At least her cell phone was still safe from the anonymous stranger. She wondered how long it would last. The caller always ended up finding her new number. Which was another matter altogether.

Magdalene reached out and pointed out the figures concerning the Russian language program on the spreadsheet. Sam's scent—lily of the valley, fresh cut grass and sunshine—enveloped her in a caress, and she couldn't help but inhale deeper. Her inability to keep Sam out of her thoughts, or her showers, was not helping.

Sam had stayed behind after one of the committee meetings to ask her about the budget, her eyes wide and curious, and Magdalene took it for what it was—an honest attempt to understand, to find common ground. And so she gave in. First, to the questions about facts and figures, arrangements regarding professors, and funding distribution. Then to the scent and the sensation of Sam's body heat, so close to hers.

Leaning over the table, their faces were so near, and when their eyes met and locked, seconds ticked by, punctuated by heartbeats and heat rising up her neck, the connection that was always just under the surface sparked to life. Gunpowder and flame.

Sam licked her lips, and Magdalene's stomach tightened with want as she lowered her eyes, following the movement of Sam's tongue. She knew her gulp was audible, and she realized that Sam would be aware of exactly what she was thinking. About all the wickedly amazing and amazingly wicked things Sam had done to her using that tongue. And she had done so many of

them. As many as she could into the space of those hours in Manhattan.

Another gulp, this one from Sam, drew Magdalene's attention to the long column of Sam's neck, where once upon a time, marks had bloomed like peony petals, fresh and rich, left by Magdalene's mouth. The air in the room grew heavy, filled with lust, all antagonism left at the door for just this one moment when their memories were no longer warring with their reality.

Magdalene felt like she was starving. Hungry and bruised at the same time, skin sensitive, and uncomfortable in her own clothes. The collar on her blouse was too tight, her fingers tingled to loosen it, or better yet to reach for Sam. She should not touch. Their lines of demarcation were so precisely drawn. It had taken her weeks to get over caressing Sam's face in her room that night. She knew she shouldn't even think any of this.

Like a romance heroine, she changed her mind in what seemed like the space of one inhalation, and as oxygen filled her burning lungs, she became a mere spectator watching her hand caress Sam's cheekbone, thumb brushing once, twice, before the fingers delved into the short hairs at the base of Sam's neck... A spot she knew was particularly sensitive.

Her answer was a moan. Sam's eyes closed, mouth open in abandon, inches of thick, charged air between them. All Magdalene had to do was tug at the silk in her grip and their lips would finally meet.

In true Dragons' fashion—*because nobody could have nice things on this godforsaken island*—the moment was broken by a commotion coming from outside. The roaring in Magdalene's ears was deafening, and as she hastily let go, her ring caught in Sam's hair. Throwing Sam an awkward and apologetic look for the pain, Magdalene closed her eyes and counted to ten.

At six, she opened them to see George all but stumble into the office, arms full of another grotesque arrangement of mutilated flowers.

The ambient noise spiked, filling the room with shouts, gasps and subsequent vitriol. George was pissed and didn't care who knew it, whereas Sam froze, her shock palpable.

Well, that cleared that up. Not that Magdalene had ever suspected Sam, especially after the incident with Lily. That face, those eyes... They may be reluctant to believe that Magdalene wanted the best for the school—and why would they, since Magdalene herself had no idea what she wanted to do to this damned pile of rocks and stones or whether there'd even be a school by the time she was done—but Sam wasn't a liar.

Lust mixed with sadness and shock lived in those features now, and

Magdalene, as always, read them like an open book. Still, it was comforting to know that no matter what was happening, Sam seemed to not have anything to do with it.

George's shouts pulled Magdalene out of her musings. "This is a disgrace! The third one this week alone. Not to mention the dead rat we found in your rooms earlier. Maggie, this has got to stop."

Sam's eyes widened even more as she looked between the two of them. Undeterred by Sam's perplexed countenance, George deposited the wilted roses on the table right on top of the spreadsheet they'd been leaning over.

Sam all but leaped over the chair to get to the flowers, but Magdalene just shrugged and waved away the entire thing. She really just wanted all of it gone so she could get on with her day and with her job. She was also just a touch grateful that they were interrupted, because she had been sinking fast and wasn't entirely certain how she felt about it.

"The Old Dragonettes have been making their feelings known about some of the reforms I have announced. Let's just say they are less than pleased. And even less civil in their retaliatory tactics. Dead flowers, dead rodents—"

"And what, they've been sending you rotting bouquets as a warning?" Sam's outrage was rather endearing, all things considered. "This is harassment!"

Magdalene shrugged. "No more than Orla accosting me every day over breakfast to push me to rush my decision about scholarships or the English curriculum. This is just a bit more gruesomely poetic than the constant bickering, don't you think?"

"No, I don't think there's anything remotely poetic about this. At least Orla has the guts to tell you she hates your ideas to your face. This is cowardly!"

"Ah, so it's okay, as long as the insults are signed and delivered in person?" Magdalene knew her laughter held no merriment, but she didn't hold it back.

"No, neither is okay, but Orla is being upfront. And what's this about a rat?" Sam crossed her arms defensively, but her eyes were wide, concern obvious in their ashen depths.

"Nothing. If anyone thinks that a poor imitation of The Godfather horse's-head-on-the-bed scene is going to intimidate me or keep me from doing the job they hired me to do, they are sadly mistaken."

"Somebody put a dead rat in your bed? Headmistress, we need to call the

police!” Disarming as the outrage may be, Sam was shaking with obvious fury now, and Magdalene’s treacherous, desirous heart was weak, powerless where Sam was concerned, wanting to wrap her up in her arms and tell her everything would be all right. She wasn’t sure it would be. Nothing ever really was on this damned island, but for Sam’s sake, she wanted to make such assurances.

God, what was happening to her?

The uncharacteristic gentleness irked her. Her stomach now churning with anger at herself and at Sam’s unwavering loyalty to people who really did not deserve it, Magdalene went for a blow below the belt, testing Sam’s loyalties one final time.

“For all we know, it is Orla who has been putting dead critters in my bed, Professor Threadneedle. Have you thought of that? I knew I would end up regretting keeping her on staff even with a probationary period.”

Sam actually recoiled. “I don’t believe that for a second. Orla is one of the most upfront and honest people in the world.”

“Such adulation you bestow upon her, Professor.” Acid dripped from her every word, but Magdalene couldn’t find it in herself to regret it. This woman had been one second away from throwing her on the table and devouring her whole and yet, here she stood, tall and proud, defending someone who wouldn’t object to Magdalene being as dead as the very flowers George had brought in.

“Orla Fenway would never do this, Headmistress. You said yourself, she’s been confronting you and fighting you left, right, and center every day. Why send you dead flowers or put dead animals in your room? And why would she even have access to your room?”

“Well, the first rat was found here in my office and I haven’t changed the locks since I started at Dragons.”

Sam flinched, the implication that Orla easily could have gotten a dead rat into the Headmistress’ office if she’d wanted to clear. Magdalene knew she’d scored a hit, yet Sam was relentless.

“How long has this been going on?”

“It started sometime after Lily sprained her ankle on those wet tiles.”

Sam hung her head, her cheeks flaming red. Had she really already forgotten? Or had she figured it was a mere accident? Whatever her thoughts, it was clear that she hadn’t foreseen further incidents and their aftershocks in the form of dead creatures and massacred flowers.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“For all we knew, it could have been you, Sam.” George’s voice made both of them jump. Magdalene had all but forgotten the secretary was in the room with them. Judging by Sam’s expression, so had she, and it took her a second longer to recover. Unsurprisingly, considering the allegation George had flung at her.

“George is joking.” Magdalene deliberately gentled her voice. She would take George to task later. Sam did not deserve to be accused like this. Even at her worst, Magdalene had never seriously considered her to be at the heart of this.

Unable to hold the gray, earnest gaze any longer, she finally turned away from Sam and moved to look out the window into the pouring rain pelting the glass in rivulets.

Behind her, George had the grace to hurriedly amend her earlier statement. “Yeah, I’m joking, Sam, of course. But this is getting out of hand.”

“The police—”

“And what will we say?” Continuing to stare into the distance, Magdalene could hear George speak and pace the room at the same time, her heavy steps, despite the petite frame, leaving indents on Magdalene’s thoughts, tangling them up even more. “That we are receiving wilted flowers? Hardly a crime.”

She wanted to hang her head, falter, but she kept her back ramrod straight. She was so tired of it all. So tired, and this day was endless.

“Enough drama, George. Just throw these away. If more arrive, let me know preferably after you dispose of them. And let’s get the locksmith in here to change most of the locks in the school and dormitories. It might have been a mistake, taking some things on faith.”

Judging by the amount of clattering and mumbling behind her, George was making a huge production of dragging the massive bouquet out of the office. When the door finally snapped closed, Magdalene did not turn around from the window. She felt so fragile; she was afraid one wrong move from Sam could shatter her.

SHE SENSED MORE than saw Sam approach her. For a moment, they stood side by side, mirrored in the cloudy glass, looking at the storm outside.

“I would have never done... that.” Sam stumbled over the words, but Magdalene ignored it and simply shook her head.

“I never thought you would. That last comment about taking things on faith. It wasn’t about you.”

Sam stepped closer, and the moment was now charged with a different kind of electricity, one of comfort and intimacy. The cocoon that this intimacy was weaving around them gave Magdalene another surprise for the night. She was suddenly aware of exactly what she was about to say, and she also knew that she was absolutely powerless to stop herself. Magdalene wanted to tell truths to this woman. To share pieces of herself with Sam she had never shown anyone else.

In fact, she understood the enormous risk she was taking by even broaching any of the subjects she was about to, and yet... Sam’s face, full of sadness and longing, gazing back at her in the reflection of the stormy window, was slowly knitting small pieces of her heart together. It was impossible to resist. She let the words fall, as both flower petals and grenades. Sam’s closeness, that now familiar warmth, emboldening her.

“For as long as I can remember, I have always had this feeling of being stalked. Like I was prey to a wolf that was simply taking its time before pouncing. Sometimes the sensation is so strong, I swear I could just turn around and see the animal looking at me from the shadows. I never simply leave things to chance. I should have changed those locks a long time ago.” She stopped to take a deep breath, considering her words more carefully now, reluctant to wound with what was to come.

Still, it felt right to say it. They’d been dancing around it long enough.

“But I never for one second thought it could be you. You hold very obvious leverage where I’m concerned. If you had wanted to really hurt me, scare me, or make me reconsider some things around here, all you had to do was use said leverage.” Magdalene could feel her heart hammer in her chest as she tried very hard to solely state the facts, get the words out, then let the chips fall as they would.

“You mean...” Sam faltered, shaking her head, then raising a questioning eyebrow at Magdalene.

“I mean that you could rather truthfully accuse me of sexual harassment or favoritism based on our previous history, and short of outright lying, I’d

have very few ways to deny it.”

She didn't acknowledge that she'd considered, for the briefest of moments. In the reflection, Magdalene could see the shock on Sam's face as her head snapped around to face her fully. When Magdalene didn't avert her gaze from the window, Sam grabbed her by the shoulders and forced her to meet her eyes.

“What happened in New York had nothing to do with sexual harassment. How can you think so after everything?” Sam struggled with words, her mouth opening and closing. Magdalene remained silent so as to not interrupt, sensing how important it was for Sam to say what she needed to.

“Is this why you've been so cryptic and cautious around me? Avoiding even the mention of us having been together months ago? I can't even begin to gather my thoughts to address this, but surely you're aware that I'm in the closet at school, and let's set aside my ethics and decency, I wouldn't be able to submit a complaint against you without outing myself in the process!”

There was so much to consider with this answer Sam had so carelessly thrown at her. So much. Sam's ethics, Sam's obvious anguish over Magdalene staying away from her, but what was akin to a slap was that Magdalene felt validated and yet supremely hurt that the mutually assured destruction strategy *had* crossed Sam's mind. And yet, she was still unable to unleash the full power of her fury, no matter how much hurt there was behind it now.

“So what would you have me do? Every single person at Dragons hates me and wants me gone. Even you. To trust that you wouldn't use what you could against me? How could I have done that when you yourself confessed to Timothy that you'd use every single advantage?” Magdalene all but vibrated with repressed anger. She had waved Sam's words away back in her room, but the issue of the split loyalty, so obviously reinforced again today by Sam standing by Orla, had abraded Magdalene's already raw feelings.

“And you do now? Trust me?”

“Well, if you had wanted me gone, or at least my reputation seriously damaged, out or not, you'd have already used this particular trump card against me.” Sam's face was etched with worry, and Magdalene regretted the outburst. She was hurt, she felt all alone in her fight and yet, how was she supposed to fight dirty when this woman completely disarmed her?

“Don't use that word. I think it has been forever sullied for me by that twice-impeached man who shall not be named.” As Sam had probably

expected, the joke worked, and Magdalene felt the corners of her mouth twitch.

“As much as it hurts me to admit that you might be right, he did ruin the word forever. Shame, I rather liked what it meant once upon a time, Sam.”

The gray eyes lifted, and suddenly there was so much joy, so much sincere happiness in them, it took Magdalene’s breath away. Sam was obviously done with the topic, because she looked radiant. Magdalene turned to her fully and basked in that light, as if the sun had stepped into the room, leaving the outside dark and gloomy and filling the office with all its warmth. Sam smiled, dimples showing, making Magdalene a little lightheaded, then leaned closer and whispered almost against Magdalene’s ear, making her shiver.

“Say it again.”

Puzzled at first, Magdalene struggled to comprehend, but then Sam’s fingers on her shoulders brushed the skin uncovered by the loose collar of her blouse, and it was as if the interruption, the flowers, George, had never happened. The fire roared to life again, hotter than before, and she heard herself give Sam what she wanted. *Gunpowder, indeed.*

“Sam... Sam...” Her hand lifted once more, ready to assume what seemed like its rightful place on the nape of Sam’s neck. Except at the very last moment, the last vestiges of reason prevailed and Magdalene took a step back, her hand falling limp to her side. So much depended on her, and so much could be lost in one single moment.

Too close. Too close...

“I can’t, Sam. And I won’t apologize for why.”

“Magdalene...” Sam clenched her fists and looked like she wanted to howl at the moon that was currently obscured by the tempestuous clouds. But Magdalene just shook her head, refusing to acknowledge the longing in Sam’s voice. There was plenty of said longing to go around. She certainly wasn’t immune to it. But the stakes were too high and her dread too strong. Gunpowder or not, fear choked her regardless, and trust was never something she came by easily.

“You might’ve forgotten, in the hormone overload that just took place here, but while we’ve established my nascent trust for you, you still neither trust me nor like me and my decisions. In your mind, we are still very much on opposite sides of enemy lines. And above all that, I have a job to do, a job which I will not risk nor jeopardize in any way.”

“I didn’t draw those lines!” Sam moved forward, but Magdalene sidestepped her and moved away.

“You may not have drawn them, but you follow them by virtue of your loyalty and your staunch belief that I’m here to destroy everything you hold dear.”

“Aren’t you?”

Well, as blows went, this one landed fair and square dead center of Magdalene’s chest, where that wound she had nursed her entire life, had been slowly healing, unbeknownst to her. Sam’s hit did what any direct one would do to a knitting wound—it re-opened it, to Magdalene’s absolute lack of surprise. Sam didn’t believe her or in her. Well, what had she really expected, since just a few weeks ago she herself had no clue what she was going to do about the school?

And yet, now that she was steadfast in her pursuit of at least safekeeping it for the moment, it rankled that of all people, Sam was the one to still think this badly of her. Magdalene thought that she really should stop having these thoroughly foolish feelings of hope and faith.

“I believe this conversation is over, Professor Threadneedle.” Sam looked at her a moment longer, perusing her features like she was trying to memorize them. Like she’d never return again. It made Magdalene regret her words the way only Sam could. But then, without a single sound, she was out of the office and a few minutes later, Magdalene could see her walking in the pouring rain, alone.

OF MEDDLING MOTHERS & LIVE WIRES

Something had to give. Preferably not her sanity. Magdalene paced the confines of her office, Willoughby purring like a freight train every time she walked by him and gave him a quick scratch.

When did she get into the habit of never passing him by without a pet or a belly rub? How had this pudgy critter weaseled himself into her good graces? She smiled to herself, at her own steadfast denials of affection for the tom. She knew when. And she knew how.

Magdalene gave him a long look. He gazed back at her, purring louder, eyes slitted in ecstasy. Then, as if sensing that she needed something, he bumped his big, round head into her palm and left it there, making her carry quite a hefty chunk of his considerable weight.

Still, the warm and soft fur, coupled with the solid piece of cat in her hand, grounded her. The feeling of helplessness drained from her body, sped up by the vibrations of the purring feline.

The phone on her desk rang, making Magdalene flinch and reluctantly push Willoughby back onto his pillow. He chirped at her, a scratchy, rusty meow that sounded entirely displeased. Yeah, she could sympathize. It was probably another unhinged caller contacting her to give her more grief about whatever part of her running the school displeased them that day. Unless the mouthbreather had finally given up on her cell and resorted to the landline.

“Nox.” She could hear the fatigue in her own voice as she answered.

“Oh thank God, I thought it would be *that woman* picking up, seeing as how she is still your secretary and honestly, Magdalene, I fail to understand why you didn’t drop the man’s wretched name.”

Well, maybe not unhinged, or not entirely, but her mother was definitely

calling to give her grief. The tone and the sentiment suggested as much.

“Mother—” Magdalene infused her voice with as much calm as she could muster, but Candace was not deterred.

“Do not ‘mother’ me. Not only should you have dropped his name, you should stop associating with him altogether.” A displeased “tsk” followed the slightly high-pitched increase in volume. Magdalene turned the watch on her wrist and glanced at the time. Well, it was nine in the evening. Her mother had been imbibing for some time then. Sidestepping the issue of poor George entirely, since she was not in the mood to get into useless battles with Candace over her friend not being at her desk at this hour, Magdalene found no alternative but to inquire about her ex-husband.

“What did Timothy do to displease you this time, mother?”

“He exists, isn’t that enough?” A silence followed the outburst. Magdalene looked at the dark sky behind the glass and wondered what Sam was doing and whether she’d made it to the dormitory safely. She probably got wet, judging by the steady stream of water still battering the window. For some reason, instead of latching on to the ‘wet’ innuendo, her mind focused on the concern of Sam catching a cold, and whether she was now—thirty minutes later—warm enough wherever she might be.

Catching up with the stream of her own thoughts, jolted by her mother’s continuous litany against Timothy, Magdalene barely processed what was going through her mind.

Warm? Christ, she had lost it, that was for sure. Sex was one thing. Thinking about Sam, wet and ready and spread out for her, was fine. Perfectly fine. In fact, Magdalene had done a lot of that. Granted, she had given more thought to herself being wet and ready and spread open by Sam, on say, this very desk, where they had been engaged in much less fun activities lately.

“Are you paying attention, Magdalene?”

Busted, Magdalene touched the spot Sam’s fingers had lingered on earlier then tugged on the already loose collar of her blouse before scrambling to say something.

“Clearly you aren’t. That cheating wastrel said as much.”

Cheating wastrel? Her mother had adored Timothy when they’d first gotten together. She was happier at the wedding than Magdalene. But then, Candace’s wrath was swift and unforgiving once Magdalene had filed for divorce. And while she’d never told her mother about the scene she had

discovered, of Timothy and his PA in her bedroom, Candace—once again—seemed to just know.

“What did Timothy say, and why are you upset?” She couldn’t quite stifle a sigh and received another answering “tsk” for her lack of trying.

“You have a cat!”

Magdalene did not bother to suppress the bark of laughter, giving into it entirely, feeling it shake her shoulders, while Willoughby stared at her with his bicolored eyes.

“Mother—”

“He will give you rabies. He will. Do not argue. Do you know that it’s incurable? Have you been vaccinated? I bet he scratched or bit you already. It’s too late now, anyway.”

“Mother...” She lowered her forehead to the windowpane and allowed the coolness to soothe her as her mother ramped up her assault on Magdalene’s senses.

“Do not google rabies, Magdalene. Especially not now that you’ve been clawed up and it’s too late to seek help. Dying from it is quite excruciating.”

“Mother...” Magdalene turned her cheek to the chill of the glass and allowed her jaw to relax. She’d do well to remember to do that more often. There was a headache brewing at her temples. Or perhaps it was just Candace.

“Also, I need you home for the ceremony at the State House. They are giving me an award.”

That garnered some of Magdalene’s attention, although she noticed even that little bit of it dwindling as soon as her mother started to explain. Candace, always attuned to her daughter’s moods when it suited her, pounced.

“You don’t care about this, so don’t ask. It’s an award. I donate enough money to the party for them to coddle me. I will send the details to that woman.” Candace’s refusal to even pronounce George’s name was so petty, it made Magdalene rub her aching temple. “Be there in two months.”

“Won’t I be dead from rabies though, mother? That excruciating death you have told me not to look up on the internet precisely because of how harrowing it is?”

The scoff coming through the line was loud and exasperated.

“The incubation period for rabies can be from a few days to three months to years. Chances are you’ll still be fine then. At least I don’t have to tell you

to dress up. You have the Smith genes. You always make an entrance.”

Magdalene smiled. Wasn't it just like her mother to dismiss mortal peril, praise with one hand, but immediately take credit for it with the other? She wanted to shake her head but was reluctant to lift it off the cool window, soothing her throbbing temples.

“Timothy also mentioned that you are distracted. By a woman.”

Now that made Magdalene stand up straight so quickly, she felt dizzy.

“Excuse me?”

“I knew it!” Candace's triumphant shout forced her to pull the phone away from her ear. “I knew it, and I told him, ‘good on her.’ He didn't like that, let me tell you. Serves him right. Nothing emasculates a man as much as his woman running off with another woman.”

“There is just so much wrong with that statement, mother, I don't even know where to begin. *His woman? Running off?* For God's sake!”

“You know I don't particularly care for his name being used in vain.”

At the rebuke, Magdalene wanted to bang her head against the window this time. Right, a woman with a dozen husbands, half a dozen lovers, and a child out of wedlock cared about the Lord's name being used in vain.

“I don't even care if it's true, Magdalene. Though after years of being this obsessed with that godforsaken school, shouldn't you be focusing on the task at hand, rather than whomever else wants your hand?”

Magdalene's temples throbbed in earnest now, and she couldn't quite believe her ears.

“Mother!” Her outburst distressed Willoughby and he hissed, although his face plainly showed his displeasure was not with her. As if to solidify her impression, he jumped off his perch and rubbed his bulk against her ankles, leaving behind clumps of his fur.

Candace was not deterred by Magdalene's raised voice. In fact, she seemed amused by it.

“Well, you got all huffy with me, young lady, and Timothy is much too upset for this to be nothing, so I know something is afoot.” The tone was too reasonable after the lurid joke, and gave Magdalene whiplash. “Just remember, you wanted this too much for too long to be getting distracted by some girl.”

The words, “She's not a girl,” were out of her mouth before she could stop herself, and Magdalene realized belatedly that she had fallen for her mother's rather simplistic ruse and confirmed everything Candace had

wanted her to. She could practically see the self-satisfied smirk on her mother's face. Magdalene tugged at the ends of her hair in frustration.

Damn...

There was silence at the end of the line, and she held her breath for whatever would come out of Candace's mouth next, but her mother surprised her yet again.

"Whoever she may be, Magdalene, keep your eyes on the prize."

The dial tone reached her ears before she could reply, and she let the hand holding the phone drop from her ear, the Vacheron weighing as heavy as always on her wrist, a testament to her mother's words.

Too much for too long...

Yes, she had. As she sat down in the deep leather chair that symbolized all the things she had indeed wanted, Magdalene stared at the desk covered with files and paperwork.

Thirty years was a long time to want something, to fight for something, to dream of something. Was this even worth it? The dead rats and those wretched flowers? The threats and the hatred she seemed to inspire everywhere she went? She squared her shoulders at the shiver that ran cold down her spine.

Unbidden came images of Sam, of that face with its perfect cheekbones and sculpted lips, torn between lust and antagonism. And yes, the question whether all this was even worth it returned tenfold.

The clock on Sky Blue Tower beat ten and Magdalene's shoulders drooped. It was time to call it a night. Sleep would be a long time coming, especially with the storm's fury outside, but there wasn't anything else she could do here in this office, no matter how much she enjoyed the symbol of her power.

WILLOUGHBY MEOWED in the rain that did not seem to lessen and trotted next to her as she adjusted her umbrella to try to cover them both as much as she could. It was a short walk between the main school building—the marble of the old, sprawling mansion, dark and ominous, cast in light by the occasional lightning strike as thunder roared in the distance—and the newer faculty dormitory.

Still wearing her heels, Magdalene chose her steps carefully and delicately, mindful of the cat and of puddles.

As she approached the rear entrance, she heard voices, one young and cheerful—forcefully so—and one desperately, hopelessly familiar that, as always, made that wound in her chest throb a bit more.

Lily and Sam. Speaking in loud voices. Something about basketball. And physics? Shoes? “What on earth?”

The question tumbled out of her mouth before she could get a good look at what was happening, but twin-cries of “Don’t come closer!” and “Stay back!” weren’t what actually stopped her dead in her tracks.

There, illuminated by more lightning, stood Sam, holding a live wire that sparked and twisted, deadly in her grip.

Magdalene’s vision blurred. Her chest tightened, and she struggled to draw breath. She had never fainted in her life, and it took absolutely all she had not to pass out then and there. Only the thought that Sam could die right in front of her kept Magdalene’s eyes open, despite the darkening film that covered them.

HOURS later and she still couldn’t breathe with her full chest, fear clawing at her throat. Magdalene had dealt with the aftermath of the incident, trying to appear calm and collected. Trying to look in control. She must have pulled it off, since everyone did what she told them to, and the situation was handled and documented, and Sam was once again safe and sound. But she still couldn’t breathe.

The water running in Sam’s shower did little to soothe Magdalene’s frayed nerves. Knowing that Sam was there—and naked—had the effect of making her both soft and edgy at the same time. She closed her eyes, the danger long past, and tried to deal with her lingering fear and her desire. Such contradicting emotions should not coexist, and yet here they were, making her earlier headache return tenfold. She tried counting again.

Except somewhere around four, an image of taking her clothes off and joining Sam intruded, and Magdalene could not find the control she was so desperately reaching for. Her breath was coming out in shallow puffs, and she felt her clothes abrading her sensitive skin. It was all too much.

Including Sam's fresh and clean face as she emerged from the shower in a pair of gray, low-hanging sweats—*lord, have mercy*—and a ratty t-shirt that had holes larger than a nickel and tempted Magdalene to make them just a touch larger by sticking her fingers in them and reaching for that still damp pale skin she'd once kissed and touched and licked...

And now she was officially driving herself crazy.

Sam smiled openly, a little too cheerfully, and that finally drew Magdalene out of her thoughts, which were entirely inappropriate for the occasion. Sam was clearly not taking any of this seriously.

"You still think this is all nothing?" She knew her voice was jagged, but the devil-may-care expression on Sam's face did not bode well for the conversation they really should have had some time ago.

Sam blinked, running a towel through that sun-kissed hair, and Magdalene turned away, curling her fingers so as to not give into the temptation to reach out and untangle the tresses herself.

"I never thought it was nothing. After all, three lightbulbs in a hallway do not magically stop working by themselves. I just sort of moved past it with no new incidents in the few weeks since. But I am really struggling to come up with a reason a person—any person—would come after me like this. And okay, the slippery, wet floor... I could've hit my head or potentially hurt myself like Lily, but being electrocuted is a huge escalation from a bump on the noggin. And we really don't know what happened with the wires, anyway."

Magdalene wasn't entirely certain what she wanted to do more, laugh or cry. Why was this woman so adorable? So absolutely bewitching?

"Did you just say 'noggin'? Did I hear you right?"

Sam's suddenly embarrassed expression finally pushed Magdalene over the edge of endurance, and she allowed herself to take a few steps closer and for her fingers to dive into the warm, wet, honeyed silk of Sam's hair.

The sensation of the burnished gold in her hand was like drinking water after dying of thirst. Magdalene perhaps should have yanked her hand away, because the danger of becoming addicted was way too great, except she just stood there, caressing the damp tresses.

In the absence of electricity—the entire building still being shrouded in darkness after the incident outside—the room was illuminated by a few candles, and Sam's sculpted face, all shadow and sharp angles, was a delightful study in their warm, flickering light. So beautiful, so doomed. Like

an angel, destined to fall... The answering look of longing that met Magdalene's eyes spoke volumes about said descent.

And what would happen when Sam took the leap? What would happen when loyalties and lust tore her in different directions? Magdalene didn't know what she wished for more. For Sam to finally take the plunge or for her to abandon her principles?

"Your strange and antiquated use of language aside, I think you're forgetting a major clue here, Elektra."

Magdalene let her voice drop low, almost involuntarily, the intimacy of the moment drawing her deeper into the candlelight and the wet of soft silk in her hand. Sam leaned into the touch, eyes closed, almost like a purring cat, and Magdalene bit her lip to not smile overtly. This was such a sensuous sight. Then Sam opened her eyes, and the sensuous turned nerd on a dime.

"Let's set aside your complete butchering of Marvel Comics, since Elektra had very little to do with electricity of any kind, and celebrate that you are even aware of her existence—"

This was a full-on assault on her system. The total adorableness paired with the involuntary sultriness of this woman... Magdalene could only take so much. She brought a finger to Sam's lips, regretting it instantly, because the contact rocked her to her core. Such a simple touch, yet her body recognized it, knew it, had felt it before, and the need to experience it again was overwhelming.

What had she been trying to say? Ah...

"I am well aware that Elektra Natchios is of Greek descent, hence her name, and wields a pair of sai as her trademark weapons of choice and has nothing to do with electricity. I am also aware that she's Daredevil's girlfriend, so maybe my attempted analogy was doubly inappropriate, but I felt in the moment that the name fit."

Sam gaped, her lips moving silently against Magdalene's finger. With a grin, she booped Sam's nose and stepped back triumphantly. She had won this round fair and square. And on top of the high of victory, she loved the effect she had on Sam and how Sam didn't even bother to hide it.

"Okay," Sam whispered and licked her lips, as if chasing the feeling of skin on skin, and Magdalene struggled not to touch her again. "You just got a hundred hot points."

Magdalene laughed, pure delight taking hold of her despite the darkness that had gained ground all around them.

“I wasn’t aware there was a scoring system. And I also wasn’t aware I hadn’t earned all the points yet.”

Sam joined her in laughter, and it felt good to be sharing this moment, the two of them, away from prying eyes and gossiping mouths.

“I’m a teacher, Sam. I taught for ten years before taking up administration exclusively as a full-time job later in my career. Truth be told, during those years, I enjoyed teaching much more than the administrative side of my job, but eventually, the pressure of management became too much, and I had to give up teaching to serve as Headmistress. I’ve been around children my entire life. Some of their more dubious pursuits—such as comics—were bound to rub off on me. And I had to keep up, couldn’t let some snot-nosed rascal outwit me. Plus, as you said, the hot points.”

Sam, who’d made herself comfortable sitting cross legged on the bed while Magdalene spoke, beckoned her and she relented, stopped her pacing, and sat down beside her.

“I think there’s more to it than keeping pace with snot-nosed rascals.” The scent of a minty soap and pure Sam, that underlying lily of the valley, was too much to resist, and Magdalene decided to take a risk and live a little as she grabbed the hand that was lying limply in Sam’s lap, intertwining their fingers.

She kept silent for a moment longer and took in how perfectly their hands fit together.

Puzzle pieces...

And maybe because of her inability to shake that sensation of belonging, of fitting in—even if it was just their entwined fingers—Magdalene felt that compulsion again. The urge to be known, to truly open herself up and let Sam in once again.

“I’ve had kids who were utterly uninterested in real life, having been abused and abandoned or simply neglected to the point where reality meant very little to them. Imaginary worlds gave them back their will to live and allowed them to thrive. Comic books have been telling stories of strength and heroism and redemption for years. Sure, female representation has only come up to snuff recently, but overall, it clamors for children’s attention just as much as any other literary medium.”

She knew that, despite her aloof tone, her fingers trembled slightly in Sam’s grip, and for once, she didn’t care about her tell. If she couldn’t trust Sam with this much, they had nothing. Sam’s face, shadowed as it was,

perfectly still in the dim light of the room, stared at their joined hands with something akin to wonder.

“You have the most peculiar expression right now.” At Magdalene’s words, Sam raised her head. She cleared her throat somewhat awkwardly and looked away, a blush suffusing the formerly pale cheeks. Magdalene waited, afraid to move or even blink. Something was about to be shared with her, and she couldn’t wait to hear it. She was so hungry to know Sam.

To know and to be known, all in the space of one evening. You’re really going above and beyond here.

She shut down her own sarcastic voice, the one that had gotten her through the worst parts of her life, the one that had kept her safe from heartache for years, and let herself be content to observe and wait for Sam’s truths.

“During my junior year in college, and after getting pretty tired of waitressing those previous years, I answered a call for volunteers at the Boston Public Library. A private collector had donated over a thousand valuable, but old and damaged books. Since the work was extremely painstaking, the library was trying to find patient students who would help with the restoration in exchange for class credits and some money.”

Slowly, Sam tugged on her hand, and Magdalene’s fingers tightened on hers before reluctantly letting go. Sam stood and pulled a slim tome from her messenger bag.

“I ended up restoring just one book during that whole summer. An 1864 first edition of the Scottish folk tale ‘The Light Princess’. Do you know the story?” Magdalene slowly shook her head, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth, and Sam offered her the book she was holding.

“Yeah, that’s okay, it’s not that well known. My point was, it’s about forty pages long in the original edition, and all those pages were pretty much glued together by time and neglect. No actual chemical, just lack of basic proper care, you know. And it was old. It took me months to separate each page from the other. It was terribly fussy work, but I got to read half a page a day, or thereabouts, and it was such a beautiful tale. I ended up buying this much newer copy since, obviously, I could never afford the antique one.”

Sam blinked and wrung her now empty hands. But Magdalene realized that she would gladly sit here and listen to Sam ramble on and on.

God, she was so past being in trouble...

“You’re the book,” Sam blurted, and the way she said it, so artlessly and

without any artifice, had Magdalene grinning and turning the slim tome in her hands.

“So I am old, difficult or impossible to read, and you’re a brave and tired conservator slogging away daily at my glued-together pages?”

Sam shook her head, but Magdalene caught her elusive smile.

“I had a point in there, somewhere. I guess it was that I was privileged to read that book, and I’m privileged to sit here with you and find out little nuggets about who you are.”

And then reality chose to rear its ugly head yet again... She had been granted a glimpse into Sam’s life, her soul, and yet this entire conversation was not just inappropriate, it was dangerous to both of them. And danger aside, like so many people before her, Sam thought she saw Magdalene. But nobody had ever cared enough, no matter what they said. Because their actions always spoke much louder than whatever platitudes and promises preceded the disappointment that was sure to follow.

Placing the book on the bedside table, Magdalene rose, leaving Sam staring at her with slumped shoulders, her gaze flat.

“Do not romanticize me, Sam. That has never, ever served anyone in my life well. Just ask Timothy. He certainly feels like I never gave him any part of who I am.”

Sam’s brow furrowed, and she bit her lip before opening, then closing her mouth again in silence, as Magdalene had learned she always did when gathering her thoughts. When she finally did speak, her words were tentative.

“I’d rather not ask anyone. I’d prefer to find out for myself. And whatever he feels, I have received more from you in this short time than I ever expected to.”

“Such fervor.” Magdalene moved farther away, putting more distance between them. She didn’t dare be too close, especially not after the day and the evening she’d had. She was too raw, desire like a fever burning her skin.

Too much...

She wanted Sam too much, but in spite of her current vulnerable state, she knew she wouldn’t be satisfied with what she found there, with the physical, even if Sam did give her what she craved at the moment. She had been right. Her immediate thirst for closeness was ultimately overridden by the one and only real want. Trust.

She looked back at Sam’s open, earnest face and had to swallow back tears. Why were they on opposite sides of this entire ordeal? As if answering

her question, more lightning illuminated the dark sky outside the rain-drenched window, and the shadow of the towering school blocked the horizon. Somewhere in the distance was the Dragon's Eye, the lighthouse keeping those who sought harbor safe on their journey. But as irony went, Magdalene could not see the structure from here. Because of the school. Because of the decaying heap of stone and wood and glass, and all these people. And all the responsibility and hate coupled with that nascent love Magdalene had for the Dragons. Or maybe it wasn't all that new. Maybe it was something that had been lost and was now on its way to being found?

It was time to deal with actual issues though, and leave the metaphysical nonsense to her sleepless nights.

"Fairytale aside, Sam. We have a real problem on our hands."

"Yeah, you mentioned I'm being too obtuse to see the major clues?" Sam's joke didn't land with her, and Magdalene wrapped her arms tightly around herself.

"The big clue you keep missing is that I live here, too. And didn't you say that you were in for the night, already in bed for what was it? An hour before the light went out."

Sam tilted her head, and the eyes that mesmerized Magdalene narrowed.

"Yeah, that's my usual bedtime, actually. If I hadn't been listening for Lily's return, and if I'd have been more careful and watched where I was going earlier instead of, you know, daydreaming about..." Sam stopped mid-ramble, and Magdalene didn't even bother to hide her smirk. "As I was saying, my shoes being as wet as they were, I just sort of stepped into the first thing that lay by the door..."

"And thank Goddess for those Wellingtons."

For good measure, Magdalene thanked the stars for the enormous fortune that Sam had discarded her drenched shoes after she'd made her way to the dormitories.

"So what you're saying is..." Sam shook her head in obvious disbelief, but Magdalene was done pussyfooting around the issue.

"What I'm saying is, I'm not at all certain you're the one these attacks have been aimed at."

Well, if there'd been even an inkling of doubt left in Magdalene's mind that Sam posed any kind of threat to her, the way her jaw dropped and her hands went limp at her sides, told a story in itself.

Since Fenway, in her 20 years at the school, had never availed herself of

the Headmistress' apartment, but rather lived in a nearby cottage, Magdalene supposed Sam hadn't considered that Magdalene, too, lived in the faculty dorm and was staying right down the hall. Or, for that matter, that what had been happening was possibly directed at the new headmistress and someone might be trying to overtly harm her.

The sincerity in the astonishment on that angular face was endearing, and Magdalene bit her lip because no, she did not want to be ensorcelled. She did not want to find this woman adorable. Or cute. Or pretty much irresistible. *Absolutely not.*

“It’s not that far-fetched, Sam. But since it’s clear that you seem unconvinced, humor me for a second here. What’s your relationship with David Uttley?”

Comically, as if on cue, Sam’s mouth dropped open again, and despite her clear efforts to close it, Sam was not entirely successful. When she finally found her voice, it was tinged with disbelief.

“You think David Uttley, the guy who keeps asking me out and helps me run the Debate Club, is my occasional marathon training partner and the one person on this staff who is not prone to histrionics, is somehow trying to... What? Hurt me? Because I refuse to date him?”

Sam was clearly not yet grasping that she was not the target of the attacks. She was too nice, too compassionate, and too loyal. Magdalene tried to remain dispassionate, or at least maintain the veneer of it, and schooled her features. But the beginning of Sam’s reply, especially the part that confirmed Uttley was pursuing her, made her see green.

If she hadn't been angry, she’d consider the irony of Sam bringing out these things in her, bookending this evening that had started with her vision going gray with it turning green now. The things this woman did to her...

But she was too upset, and Sam’s disinterest in him was the saving grace. Magdalene’s jaw had relaxed slightly by the time Sam finished speaking.

Still, Uttley’s pursuit of Sam did give him a motive. Sam might think they were being so subtle in how they circled each other, a teacher and a Headmistress, but Magdalene knew that a keen observer would be able to see the signs of this undercurrent between them.

She chose to let the entire thing with Uttley go. For now. There was no need to rile up Sam even more after the night she’d had.

“I don’t mean to insinuate anything. I’m just trying to understand what’s happening, because by absolutely everyone’s accounts, Sam Threadneedle is

a regular Pollyanna, beloved and adored and cherished. I, on the other hand, am not.”

Sam tried to interject, but Magdalene pushed through.

“Sam, I’ve had veiled threats and dead rats sent to me. Why do you think it is unreasonable that anyone, maybe even some Old Dragonette, or one of the current ones for that matter, would wish me harm?”

Sam’s shoulder tensed. “Well, wishing you harm and sending you dead plants and rodents—though highly gross and horribly wrong—is quite a step from getting you electrocuted.”

Magdalene chose to remain silent, standing still and watching the storm rage outside. She took a breath, then another, desperate to calm the tempest inside her, so similar to the one outside.

The floorboards creaked, and after a few seconds, she felt a careful hand on her rigid shoulder. She desperately clung to the rage, because the earlier want, the earlier vulnerability and craving for connection, for understanding, for touch, were sure to overcome her at any minute. And Sam... Sam was the embodiment of everything Magdalene desired and shouldn’t have. Couldn’t have, really.

“I’m not excusing anyone, because the conclusions we have arrived at just now are pretty awful. But you do have to admit that some of the reforms you’re proposing at Dragons are threatening the livelihood of a lot of people —”

If Sam had slapped her, she would have been hurt less. And less surprised. The pain was like lightning, burning her from the inside, leaving a husk of pure, fiery anger.

“And so I deserve to die?” She knew she reflected that anguish, and beyond anything now, she had wanted to save what little dignity she had left. This woman had already seen way too much, had already glimpsed into the depths of her soul, and Magdalene felt she had nothing left to give. Not right now.

She tried to press past Sam, only to have her hold on to her wrist, her head tilted, obviously asking for permission and mindful of consent even when both of them were falling apart.

And so Magdalene gave in, unable to—in spite of everything—resist the earnest gaze and the sincere regret in those gray eyes. She nodded, and Sam tugged at her forearm until Magdalene was enveloped in lanky arms, in a firm yet gentle grip.

“I’m so sorry. I apologize for the inadequacy of my words. And the cruelty and carelessness you perceived in them. That is not what I meant. I mean, no matter how you slice it, this is all rather horrible, and you’re in danger because of the nature of your job and the responsibility you took on. I’m worried about you.”

Sam’s trademark honesty only packed more punch into the already heavy blow to Magdalene’s vulnerability. And she was weak and pliant in those arms, wanting nothing but to lean in fully and allow Sam to soothe her, to comfort her. To save her. She wanted to shake her head at herself, but Sam’s voice was pulling her further in, making her feel safe, despite everything around them having a jagged edge of danger.

“You are cutting into a living organism here with Dragons, both old and new, and this organism is obviously outraged. But you know this. I just want you to be safe and careful. And if that means giving in on some of the things you’re trying to do...”

Well, they had come too close to that sharp edge, and the knife sliced deep. Magdalene stiffened and rolled her shoulders. Sam immediately let her go, but she didn’t move entirely out of the embrace, just far enough to glare daggers right at Sam. How could this woman go from tender and understanding, seemingly seeing right through her, to stubborn and utterly impossible in the span of a few seconds?

“You’d love that, wouldn’t you? For me to bargain with my principles and spare some of the outdated and horribly mismanaged vestiges of the so-called old you are all clinging to? I won’t do it, Sam. I will quit before I agree to this. I will do everything that is necessary to drag this school back to where it belongs. And I will not back down because somebody is too cowardly to confront me and speak their displeasure to my face.”

It was Sam’s turn to recoil as if slapped, but the wound in Magdalene’s chest pulsed with the force of her own conviction.

“You don’t really mean it, Magdalene. You know that I’d never want anything to happen to you. Maybe that’s why I was much more comfortable—if you can call it that—with these incidents happening to me and not thinking that there is a possibility that they’re aimed at you.”

Magdalene gave her a long perusal, studying Sam’s face. Her shoulders relaxed again as she slowly scanned the now well-known angles and planes illuminated by the flickering candles. Features she dreamed about, features she had no business thinking of anymore. Yet here they were, and the bright,

sad eyes gazed at her with so much sincerity, so much longing...

No, above all else, Magdalene knew the truth. Had already had that truth reaffirmed earlier, when the expression on the sharp lines of her face had told her Sam wasn't the one hunting her. And now more than that—and perhaps more importantly than that—what she saw in Sam's eyes told her that Sam wished her safe.

She nodded, settling the matter both in her head and outwardly for Sam. "I believe you."

Her words did something to Sam then. The longing turned hot, and the spark that was always banked between them roared to life, like a volcano erupting, all fire and heat.

Their eyes met, and they both hovered for what felt like an eternity, just a breath away from each other, before Magdalene allowed her hands to delve into Sam's hair again, further disheveling it and finally bringing their faces closer, crushing their mouths together.

The kiss wasn't tender. It managed to be sharp, cutting through both pain and longing. Like the undertow, it sucked her into the deep, robbing her of breath, and when the sensation spread, she wondered why she needed air at all.

Initially, Sam allowed her to lead, to drink her fill, to get the solace in her arms. And so Magdalene took everything she needed, strength, tenderness, bravery, then gentled her mouth, caressed instead of unnerved, allayed instead of frightened, and gave instead of taking.

When the raw need ebbed, Sam seized control the way she had in Manhattan, sweeping her off her feet. A touch of Sam's tongue drew out a moan Magdalene could not have withheld if her life depended on it, and it was as if it set Sam ablaze. It was Sam now, demanding, taking, bruising. Magdalene surrendered, allowing herself to be taken, the sensation still so unfamiliar yet so very right coursing through her, and making her vibrate much like the live wire Sam had held in her hands just an hour ago.

As Sam finally surfaced to draw in a breath, the kiss coming to a natural close, Magdalene stepped away from her, putting several feet between them. Her mind and body were reeling. Wet and dizzy, she needed distance, even if only to be able to breathe again. She had indulged enough. But despite setting her jaw and squaring her shoulders, signaling Sam to back off, she didn't need to. Sam's eyes, still foggy with lust, were full of understanding.

"I know, you can't..." Magdalene, who wanted to howl at the rain-cloud-

obscured moon, instead flicked her wrist, silencing Sam in an instant. They were fools, both of them, really. And they were being overtaken by a situation so much bigger and so much more serious than either of them truly comprehended.

Despite Sam's intelligence and intuition, Magdalene had been beaten and bruised by life enough to know better. It was also time to heed her mother's advice. The school, with everything she hated and everything she was beginning to cherish again, was still paramount. And perish the thought of her ever quoting Candace, but keeping her eyes on the prize was paramount.

"I can, Sam, but I won't. I know you won't denounce me to the trustees or give me away in any other way. But you aren't the only one fighting on that side of the barricades, and so far and by far, you're the only one fighting fair. Nobody else on your side is, judging by the little gifts and not-so-little 'accidents'. You and I are risking everything by even being here like this. And I'm not prepared to do that. I came here to do this job and I will do it, no matter the cost."

It was Sam's turn to raise her hand to try to explain, though Magdalene had no idea what she could say. The simple truth was they were on different sides, and Sam knew this, too. They were both deeply aware of how much separated them. Magdalene's emotions and whatever kind of sexual awakening at the hands and mouth of this woman ultimately didn't mean that much in the big scheme of waiting for her destiny for thirty years.

Yes, they were blurring all the lines between them, dangerously so. But the risk was too great. Blurred was fine, but crossed? No. If they were caught, she was finished at Dragons. And the way their profession forgave men every single transgression and punished women in the harshest ways imaginable, Magdalene knew it would end her career.

She lifted her eyes and the hurt and ache mirrored back at her in Sam's was akin to agony. Magdalene went still, watching the emotion play out, so alive, so awful in its enormity. And the tug on her heartstrings, the ones dangling exposed in her chest, was so painful, she almost gasped.

Sam watched her as if she was leafing through the pages of a book, periodically stopping at a paragraph before moving along. Like the restorer she had once been, Magdalene could almost sense the gentle hands turning her pages.

She had wanted to be seen like this. Nobody ever had, nobody ever dared. She wasn't entirely certain anyone had actually ever wanted to. For all his

bravado and hunger, Timothy was never this interested. At least not overtly.

And here was Sam, eyes avid, brow furrowed, studying her like an age-old tome, like a riddle that held the mysteries of the universe. Reverent, curious, interested.

Magdalene met the gaze head-on. There was no avoiding it, and they simply looked at each other. One with hurt and longing, the other with defiance. After all, there wasn't anything else she had to give Sam. So her defiance would have to do, would have to be enough—because, despite or perhaps in spite of her own dreams of being seen and being known, she still didn't trust.

What would Sam find if she stared long enough? What would she glean from Magdalene's eyes? And would she stick around if she actually managed to see? To read? To decipher?

Magdalene didn't know the answer to any of those questions. Sam already understood certain things about her that Magdalene herself was only barely beginning to comprehend. Sam had power. The true power that came from genuine interest. And Magdalene couldn't allow anyone to have that kind of sway, that kind of leverage over her now. Not until she was certain they were on her side. Because her entire life, nobody truly ever had been, and that was both an ache and a comfort.

Her heart twisting in her chest and Sam's taste still on her lips, Magdalene finally averted her gaze. It was time to leave. Head held high, sensing Sam's eyes watching her every move, Magdalene swept out the door.

THE CORRIDOR WAS dark and silent, and Magdalene's dramatic exit did not leave her any room to grab either the flashlight or a candle. And so she stretched out her hand, allowing the walls to guide her. The stones were cool under her fingertips and she followed them like Ariadne's thread. The storm was still unleashing its fury on the island, thunder rolling and the lightning illuminating the cliffs, but here, among the shadows, Magdalene, at last, felt safe. And as her guides delivered her directly to her door, she also felt determined.

At the end of the day, it didn't matter what Sam saw, since it ultimately

wasn't enough for her. And so Magdalene had no one to fear. She could never truly trust anyone to allow herself to simply be Magdalene and not *the Headmistress*.

When she reached her room, Willoughby meowed from the spot she'd left him in earlier in the day. Magdalene had to smile at how she was so reluctant just weeks ago to even let him into her space, and now she made a point of making him comfortable here.

He was lounging on the pillow by her bed, and now Magdalene chuckled. She had been telling herself she would throw out that pillow any day now, and instead she ordered a brand new one that was supposed to be much more comfortable for corpulent cats.

Well, he deserved the very best, and if that was some fancy chonky feline accommodation, so be it. He was her knight in orange armor and for him, perhaps the only creature on this island, she was just Magdalene and maybe that was enough.

As if sensing her mood, Willoughby head-butted her palm, once, twice, before she laid it on his soft head and kept petting him as they settled down for the night in comfortable silence. No, she had no one to fear. Only a certain someone to regret.

OF DANGEROUS UNDERCURRENTS & SOY MILK

She ended up sleeping, but perhaps she'd have been better off staying awake. The dreams that chased her were full of Sam and hot embraces and hotter kisses. Magdalene could swear she woke up with Sam's taste on her lips again.

She stretched, contemplating her predicament as Willoughby rose from what Magdalene now referred to as 'his' spot—the pillow next to the bed—and carefully, as if not to hurt her by putting his entire bulk on something too sensitive, jumped on the mattress and trotted towards her hands. He made biscuits before laying down, and when her fingers dove into his fur, the purring started immediately.

The Vacheron, ticking softly from her bedside table, showed 6:00AM. She'd come to learn that Sam would be on her way to her morning run, probably doing her customary warmup just to the left of the main quad. Magdalene wasn't entirely sure why she kept watching her do it almost every day as she geared up for her own yoga hour, but she did.

Standing at the window, shadowed by her curtains like some brooding Bronte character, she would take in the stretch of the long, lanky limbs and the feet, shod in old running shoes take off in the direction of the lighthouse, pounding the pavement with grace and poise that belied the usual clumsiness. The only other place outside of the running track where Sam exhibited similar command was in bed, and Magdalene shivered at the thought.

She shivered a second time, and that one, sadly, had nothing to do with Sam. This time she was cold, the school still without power, and the chill and the wet of the maritime climate settling into the old stones fast, despite it being summertime. The electrician she had summoned last night had

promised to come early this morning to fix the wiring issue and give her a full report on what exactly had happened. In the meantime, they would have to make do with hot water bottles and the ancient chimneys.

But Magdalene did not get up to watch this morning. Last night had given her not just steamy dreams. It gave her a steamier reality to face. The kiss... She wanted to say she had no idea how it happened. But Magdalene Nox tended to be completely honest with herself, if not with many others if she could help it. And she knew exactly how it came to pass. She was keenly aware of each stroke of lips and tongue. They'd been circling each other for a month now. Anger, resentment, fear, mistrust, and lust, all setting them up for quite an explosive reconnection.

And explosive it was. One kiss did more for Magdalene than years of one-night stands with nameless, faceless women had.

She scratched behind Willoughby's ear, and his eyes closed in ecstasy, while the purring grew louder. Well, she certainly knew how he felt. She had wanted to purr yesterday too, just having Sam's hands on her.

However, her fear was greater. Fear of being betrayed, of being set up, and that old dread... The one that never quite left her after being at Rodante... Of being watched, of being hunted. Her skin felt clammy as the air grew heavy, and she pulled the covers tighter around herself. Willoughby gave out a displeased meow and snuggled closer to her, his warmth soothing her in ways she'd never expected it to.

The 'gifts' of rats and dead flowers brought back that feeling, no matter how much therapy she'd done. Not even the esteemed and venerated Dr. Helena Moore—who'd sadly given up her East Coast practice prior to moving to Los Angeles—could help her. It flattered Magdalene just a touch that one of the most famous psychologists in the country had called her an enigma and 'perhaps my most difficult case, *to date*,' but none of it had helped her condition. Paranoia didn't run in her family, and she knew there were instances, like now, when she felt herself slip into that fear.

She tsked and looked at Willoughby, now lounging on his back, paws in the air, exposing his belly to her fingers. He, at least, was supremely unbothered by all the disturbing occurrences around him.

"At least someone is killing critters on these grounds, Sir Willoughby." He moved his ears to the sound of her voice and screeched out a weak more-squeak-than-meow in response.

"Yes, I thought you'd say that." Magdalene smiled, then bit her lip,

realizing she had been talking to a cat. But it made that something that caused her to break into cold sweat dissipate, and she booped his nose in delight before getting up.

Under the raucous protest from her feline companion, who plainly resented the hell out of Magdalene's need to start her day, she took a very quick, lukewarm shower—the school's infrastructure almost useless with no power—and dressed carefully.

The pinstriped skirt fit like a second skin, and she thanked Armani for his eye for a gorgeous cut. As she snapped on her garters and stepped into the four-inch Louboutins, her disposition improved. As if she had been cast in armor.

Magdalene spent half an hour with the electrician, who hemmed and hawed his way through the most unexpected of explanations for the events of last night. She handed him a check, and he promised to have the written account of the incident on her desk by nightfall. Some things needed to be documented, she decided. And some things needed to be avoided at all cost, if she wanted her mood to remain intact.

Orla Fenway was one of those things. No, satin and lace and red soles would not make her bulletproof, but when she rounded the corner and saw the previous headmistress waiting by the Mess Hall staring daggers at her, Magdalene felt decidedly good about herself.

It may have been a petty observation, but Orla was clearly dressed in the clothes she'd slept in, her makeup all but smudged, and her generally disheveled appearance spoke volumes about her state of mind. By contrast, Magdalene was well aware that she looked fresh as a daisy and made up like a rose. She threw her shoulders back just a little and walked towards her predecessor.

“I know what you're doing and it won't work, Nox!”

“Dr. Nox, Headmistress, honestly even Magdalene would do at this early hour, Professor.” She waved a dismissive hand in Fenway's direction, but the older woman persisted.

“Do not play dead with me, Nox!”

A quality in the tone, in its ugly and dangerous undercurrents, provoked something in Magdalene. She turned sharply, only to witness Orla's eyes narrow in such an expression of hatred, it took all her strength not to recoil.

There was no reason for such visceral emotion, no reason at all. Yet the loathing glared at her from the glacier blue eyes, as if possessing this frail,

unkempt body—like it was placed there by some demonic hand, to embody it and spew poison on Magdalene every time they crossed paths.

Perhaps intuiting her thoughts, or maybe sensing the malice emanating from Fenway, Willoughby meowed and took a rather sudden swipe at Orla's ankle. She managed to sidestep him, but Magdalene had to pick him up since he was clearly out for blood. He wiggled in her arms before she gave him a squeeze, then he growled at Orla, letting her know with the dirtiest of feline stares what he thought of her.

Magdalene shifted his bulk in her arms, making a mental note to get a lint roller for her office, since her entire left side was now covered in cat hair.

"I think you should choose your words carefully, Professor Fenway. After all, last night was traumatic enough for us all. And death was not entirely out of the question, despite the report from the village electrician."

"I am here precisely because of that. When will you stop involving the townies in our affairs? I will not allow all this outside interference in school business. You're bringing in all those lowlife types here, to traipse around the girls and endanger them!"

Oh, not that old chestnut again.

"I will bring anyone and everyone I choose to, Professor Fenway. Do you know why?"

Magdalene's question clearly surprised Orla, who blinked from behind her massive lenses, her eyes slightly blurry and watery.

"Um... Why?"

Magdalene gave her a pointed once-over, eyes deliberately stopping to underscore her disdain for some of the rattier items of clothing before focusing on the state of Fenway's hair and face. She didn't quite sneer, but it was a close call. Instead, she chose to purse her lips and narrow her eyes.

"Because I am the Headmistress, and I make all the decisions about this school, Professor Fenway. Especially since I'm the one being targeted and harassed. So yes, I'm in charge. Not the teachers, not the trustees, and certainly not you. You don't appear to be fit anymore, Professor."

It was small of her, a little mean, and certainly very petty, but she enjoyed seeing her opponent recoil in turn before clearly finding whatever was giving her courage these days and launching into shrill shouts, threats, and foot stomping.

Magdalene tuned her out. She had landed several punches. Her morning was made. Not even the, "you will regret this," thrown at her as she turned

her back to Fenway prior to entering the Mess Hall could darken her mood. She had already gleaned that the one person she wanted to see, had craved to be in the presence of, was quietly sipping her coffee from an oversized mug at the faculty table. Alone.

Heaven. Mercy.

As Fenway's sneakers squeaked away, carrying their enraged owner to whichever lair she occupied these days—or more likely to the nearest watering hole to either drown her sorrows or rally more of her forces to harass Magdalene—she opened the door wider, allowing Willoughby to walk in ahead of her.

The landed blows and satisfaction at her own pettiness didn't erase the ugliness of the encounter, and Magdalene shook her head, trying to dislodge the annoyance. She did not want to allow this mood to spill even a single drop of poison on Sam.

And so she followed Willoughby a little stiff and a little raw around the edges. As she approached the woman in question and their eyes met, Magdalene realized she had missed Sam, despite seeing her only a few hours ago. Despite feeling torn. She bit her lip, feeling a little giddy.

How silly... How entirely unbecoming of her... To pine? She cleared her throat.

But then Sam smiled, her entire face transforming, and Magdalene had to suppress the desire to grin right back. God, she was so pretty, and Magdalene was just so gone for her.

The realization wasn't new. Magdalene was perfectly aware she had wanted this woman since their encounter in Manhattan, but as always, it both rankled and thrilled at the same time. She pressed her lips together, yet her pulse hammered annoyingly in her throat.

Dismissing both the hammering and her annoyance, Magdalene sauntered towards the faculty table, every step allowing her to see Sam's expression clearer. And yes, elated was the word Magdalene chose to settle on, because that face... Those expressive features that were incapable of hiding any thought or emotion appeared nothing short of enraptured.

In the span of the few seconds it took her heels to transport her closer to Sam, she read lust, adoration, need, and hunger in the gray eyes, and her heart sped up at the array of feelings on display.

With her mouth slightly open, tongue peaking out to wet the dry lips, Magdalene knew exactly where Sam's mind had gone—to the small room in

New York, to the moments when Magdalene was pliant and panting and wet and disheveled, and wanting so much, but also feeling so much... All at the mercy of those soft hands with their slim fingers, of that mouth that was now so close to her own, so tantalizing and seductive in its earnestness and longing.

They were both feeling this. The tear in the universe that had somehow folded itself like origami to bring them together. And they were both absolutely helpless to stop it.

Still, for appearances' sake, if for no other reason, Magdalene tried to school her features and let Sam know she was onto her. A raised eyebrow seemed to do the trick again, even within this totally different context, and Sam flushed a deep crimson.

Magdalene felt her core muscles clench, and her hands twitched with the impulse to reach out and tug at Sam's hair until she'd raise her face and they would have no other option but to kiss again.

With considerable effort and some pretty ingenious thoughts about Orla Fenway, the Dragonettes, rats, and dead flowers to distract her, Magdalene managed to calm her racing heart. She felt a little sticky, her thong no match for the powerhouse that was Sam Threadneedle—with desire written all over her face, no doubt having dirty thoughts about debauching her—but she rallied, nonetheless.

Magdalene gave Sam one last look, infusing it with as much authority and arrogance as she could, solely because she should, at least occasionally, put this woman in her place. But Sam just grinned sheepishly, and Magdalene relented.

She twirled around before Sam could see her answering grin and instead chose to doctor up her coffee from the assortment of accouterments that were spread across a side table. Then she approached Sam, whose pose of languid lounging did little to stop Magdalene's mouth from watering.

"You look comfortable, Professor Threadneedle." Sam threw her a sideways look, visibly struggling to hide her blush, and buried her face in her coffee mug.

"Good morning to you, too, Headmistress Nox." When she surfaced, Sam inclined her head towards the door. "If it wasn't thoroughly unprofessional, I'd say you look wonderful today, so instead I'll say that you look like you're having a bit of a morning."

Magdalene sat down carefully, setting her mug in front of herself.

Immediately, Willoughby reminded them of his presence with a loud meow.

“You mean the esteemed Professor Fenway and her usual histrionics? She is very upset that I dared to insinuate that somebody is out to oust me and perhaps even harm me.”

Sam sat back, clearly surprised. “You spoke to her about yesterday?”

“The whole island knows by now, either due to the fact that I had the local electrician up to inspect the damage and give me his conclusions about what happened and fix the damn power over at the faculty dormitory, or because absolutely nothing at this school can remain secret for even a couple of hours.”

Sam smiled, though Magdalene could see she was ready, if not eager, to move the conversation away from Fenway. She admired loyalty, but damn, why couldn't Sam be loyal to someone else instead of that harpy?

“What did the electrician have to say?”

Magdalene stirred her coffee and decided to be magnanimous. Sam's smile was adorable, and it really was time to leave Fenway out of her morning.

“The damndest thing. And don't get me wrong, if his assessment is correct, I will call law enforcement immediately, but I might need to bring in another electrician from the mainland to make sure this one wasn't just hungover or something, but he said the strangest thing. He swore up and down that some devices, resistors or some such things were used to lower the voltage in the power line, bringing it down significantly. He said that, under the circumstances, a person would've gotten some burns, but that would pretty much be the extent of the damage.”

“I'm sorry, somebody did what?” Sam gaped at her, the shock so acute, so sincere, it warmed Magdalene's heart. Yes, she'd already determined that Sam had nothing to do with the adverse events, but every single time she saw confirmation that her faith was not misplaced, it laid another brick in the foundation of something that was building inside Magdalene's heart.

“Even if you wouldn't have been wearing the galoshes, the electrical current would not have killed you. Given you a pretty unpleasant jolt and maybe burned your hand, but it wasn't strong enough to do worse.”

Sam blinked, and Magdalene saw her shoulders relax slightly.

“Just malicious then.”

“Yes, not murderous.” Magdalene spoke as softly as she could, and then silence reigned. There wasn't much more they could say on the subject, and

since bringing up her suspicions about Orla Fenway or David Uttley was not conducive to having a nice morning, she let it go.

She looked at her mug and realized that Sam, as always, had managed to get all of her attention, even drawing it away from the one thing she had never once ignored in favor of anyone. Her coffee.

She blew carefully on the still steaming mug and its lifeline in the form of golden liquid, when Willoughby suddenly screeched as though he was being skinned and gave her leg a mighty headbutt.

Sam stared at him in surprise.

“He seems hungry?”

“He seems particularly unpleasant this morning. Not that a cat is pleasant in general.”

Magdalene tried for her best stern look. Her relationship with the tom was nobody’s business, really, not even Sam’s. Why did everyone insist on calling her out on it? She couldn’t understand.

She huffed an exasperated breath and was more than ready to change the subject again when Sam started to laugh.

“Ouch, you really should stop trying to fool me. I know you’re just as fond of him as he is of you.”

“I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about, Professor, he’s just a strange animal that the school insists on keeping around for some reason. I have nothing to do with him.”

Magdalene knew her tone was pure evil, even as she looked around, trying to find something suitable to feed him. She spied a sausage-filled skillet on the breakfast buffet and got up to get some for him. No sooner had she left her chair than Willoughby scrambled up onto the table with a speed and agility that belied his massive bulk, and in an instant, upended her precious coffee mug.

To Magdalene’s horror, Sam jumped up, hissing as she clutched her hand, shaking it. Magdalene rushed to her side, glaring at Willoughby, who appeared unrepentant and completely content as he sat on the table, observing the mess he’d just made.

Tugging at Sam’s wrist and sidestepping the pooling coffee on the floor, she examined the scalded red skin. *Cold*. They needed something cold. Magdalene pulled Sam to the side table and tossed all the pats of butter from the bowl of ice cubes they’d been chilling in. Sam blinked, clearly not comprehending what was happening, allowed Magdalene to maneuver her

hand and fill her scalded palm with ice, wincing and whimpering under Magdalene's gentle ministrations.

"This sucks, the cold hurts more than the hot coffee, I swear." Sam shuddered, but Magdalene held her hand firmly, her fingers closing over Sam's fist.

"I would not have taken you for a wimp, Professor. What would your students think?" She kept her tone teasing and playful, trying not to frighten Sam. Her effort must have succeeded, because despite the obvious pain and tension in the shoulders, Sam smiled a smile Magdalene knew. One so full of adoration and want—simple, uncomplicated want—despite all the unpleasantness they had found themselves in, that it had made Magdalene's heart ache with the sweetness of it.

"Not a wimp exactly..." Sam mumbled, and Magdalene scoffed, but didn't want to embarrass her more.

After a few tense moments, Sam was the one to speak first. "Well, this might explain why my coffee didn't quite taste as usual."

Magdalene followed her line of sight, and she could feel blood drain from her face. Not an accident, not Willoughby being a ginger asshat... She felt her limp fingers slip off Sam's hand and blanched.

Sam's gaze landed back on the mess on their table, where her own coffee mug was certain to be cooling rapidly amidst the wreckage. Giving Magdalene a long look, she walked over, picked it up, and took a careful sip.

"Yeah, this isn't regular 2% milk. Just doesn't taste quite right. I have no idea what that bottle is doing here and why it would have been added to the milk we normally use for our coffee." Sam's voice was calm, soothing, but Magdalene still couldn't shake the shock, her stomach roiling.

"Is it soy milk, Sam?"

Sam, her hand obviously forgotten, moved back towards the buffet table, took a sip from both the bottle and the milk jug. Her face twisted almost comically.

"I wouldn't really know soy milk if it came in and introduced itself. But whatever's in the bottle is also in the regular milk jug, and it's not a cow product for sure. Why?"

Magdalene turned away from Sam, who was still holding the bottle with the scratched-off label, and gave Willoughby a long look, before extending her hand, which he took as an invitation to pad forward and curl into it.

She took a deep breath before facing Sam again. "I'm allergic to soy,

Sam.”

Now it was Sam’s turn to look at her in complete shock.

“I had a salad delivered from Rowena’s last week and there was some kind of mixup. They gave me the vegan option instead of chicken. Sir Willoughby here got to eat my tofu.” She gave him one last scratch and picked him up from the table, hugging him to her chest before setting him on the pillow on the windowsill, where he promptly rolled on his back, paws in the air, and fell asleep, obviously pretty proud of himself and the job he had accomplished.

“Magdalene, how allergic?”

Sam’s voice trembled. Magdalene wanted to wave away the palpable concern, but something in that voice, perhaps that honesty again, made her open up in return.

“Not enough to kill me, but you would have had to be very quick in your dash for my EpiPen.”

“Shit.” Sam sat down, ignoring the mess she was settling amidst, cradling her injured hand to her chest.

“Eloquent, but apt.” Magdalene came closer, her hip perching against the now-wrecked table. “Orla had her coffee mug with her.” Sam’s eyes snapped up to her as Magdalene continued. “Earlier, when she accosted me about calling the electrician and about requesting another one from the mainland to assess the grid. She called it ‘outside involvement in school business’. Like it was anathema. She was sipping hot coffee from a school mug. She must have known it wasn’t regular milk.”

“At this hour, I’m amazed Orla was up and at your throat. She doesn’t take milk in her coffee and honestly, she’s not really functional until her second or third mug. There’s a reason all her classes start after 10AM. Plus, I’m not at all sure she knows what soy milk really is. She’s not particular about her drinks unless it’s whiskey. ”

Magdalene saw red.

Why, why, why, this stubborn loyalty in the face of damning evidence?

“Dammit, Sam!” She pushed off from the table and took a few steps, restless now. On the windowsill, the awoken Willoughby meowed in displeasure.

She turned back to see Sam tuck a lock of honeyed hair that had come loose from her messy bun behind her ear, and Magdalene followed the gesture, the way it curled and hung around the delicate shell. The guileless

gesture, the openness of those features...

She really was a fool for this woman.

Why couldn't she stay mad with her?

"Magdalene, how would she even know you're allergic?"

"She was in my office during the salad chicken-tofu debacle. I may have been rather vocal about the quality of local establishments and their customer service." She felt herself flush, and Sam shook her head at her. So she'd been a bit of a prima donna and she didn't care who knew it.

"So pretty much everyone at school must have heard you throwing a fit over soy—albeit a completely deserved one, since this allergy is no joke."

Magdalene stared pointedly. Surely Sam wasn't this obtuse. The sheer stubbornness of her interlocutor made her want to throw her hands in the air. "Sam, both Fenway and Joanne were in my office when it happened, haranguing me over the history curriculum. Hell, Joanne even gave me the third degree about feeding tofu to Sir Willoughby without first checking if he has an intolerance. What a concept!"

Sam's eyebrows all but crawled off her forehead as Magdalene continued.

"As if I'd feed him anything without having him tested for allergies? She thinks I'm irresponsible and incapable of caring for an animal."

Sam stared, eyes wide, before she spoke very carefully, voice devoid of any intonation.

"You took Willoughby to the vet?"

Magdalene wanted to groan. Then she wondered why she was even hiding her reaction. All these people were being thoroughly ridiculous. As if she'd be this careless. She may not love cats, but still.

"Of course I did. I had to know that he's healthy, doesn't have fleas, rabies, or whatever else scruffy, strange cats might have. He insists on sleeping with me at night, Sam. You think I'd let an animal in my bed without making sure he's perfectly safe? Testing for allergies seemed like a thing to do at the time."

She'd never take chances with Willoughby's health by doing something so damn foolish as feeding him the wrong food. She didn't proclaim this out loud, however, cognizant that her protestations of indifference and dislike towards him would be rendered useless then. Still, Sam let out a delighted bark of laughter.

"You are a total charlatan, Magdalene Nox! Walking around sneering at this cat, pretending to hate him and telling me to throw him out when you

probably have a whole stash of cat treats in your apartment.”

The heat in her cheeks intensified, and Magdalene bit her lip and decided it was time to move on. She got closer and gently picked up Sam’s wounded hand.

“Now let me see how badly he got you and if that ice helped at all. And, no, he won’t have his regular evening treat tonight.” She could feel the blush in her cheeks grow deeper as she caressed the slightly red skin of Sam’s palm, and judging by her face, the eyes that fluttered closed, and the slightly parted mouth, any lingering pain had been forgotten.

With tender touches, Magdalene prodded around the burn and heard Sam’s breath hitch, the pulse in her wrist beating fast. The answering increasing speed of her own heart was both unnerving and predictable.

Their eyes met amidst the mess and the commotion and the misery and intrigue brewing around them. *Electrifying*. They were so close, and not just by virtue of standing in front of each other. They were on the verge of something that had the potential to devastate them both.

Magdalene swallowed around the lump in her throat, and Sam, perhaps sensing her distress, slowly tugged her hand from the easy grasp of Magdalene’s fingers. The sense of loss seeped into Magdalene’s bones.

“I think he deserves all the treats from now on. I might even supply them myself since he saved you from a very unpleasant experience.” Sam’s whisper was hoarse. It seemed the reality of what could have happened was hitting both of them.

Their predicament aside, someone *had* just tried to poison her. Magdalene took a deep breath, held it for a few seconds, then slowly released it. The exercise did nothing to calm her down. So Sam would have to be the one to steady her.

Without much in the way of a conscious thought, Magdalene reached and gently touched Sam’s chin, raising her eyes to once again meet her own.

“I guess all the cat talk didn’t distract you. Don’t be scared, Sam. I’m all right.” Going with the impulse, Magdalene allowed herself to indulge. She leaned in and let her lips touch Sam’s forehead, the skin soft and cool under her kiss, before stepping away. The caress settled her much better than any breathing exercise ever could.

Magdalene brushed a few strands of Willoughby’s fur off her blouse before looking back at Sam. “Well, this has been fun, but whether Orla likes it or not, the school is about to be thrown into a bit of a ruckus. I’m done

being bullied and harassed. If memory serves me well, the town doesn't have local law enforcement. Still true?"

"Yeah... There's not much crime here and if need be, they call the mainland. The county Sheriff's Department covers Dragons Island."

"Well then, I have things to do, and obviously the ever-charming law enforcement to speak to."

Sam gave her one last lingering glance, her eyes unreadable now.

"I'm here if you need me." Her heart lightened just a touch, but Magdalene said nothing, merely turned, and exited the Mess Hall through the massive oaken doors, the feeling of crossing the threshold a far cry from her anxious approach months ago, when her name was being dragged through the mud and she was surrounded by all that loathing.

A few seconds later, she sensed more than heard a presence at her side. Catching up to her brisk stride, Willoughby marched defiantly beside her.

OF STAUNCH DEFENSES & BELATED RECOGNITION

Sherriff Green was a burly man with a misplaced accent and a penchant for saying ‘ma’am’ too often. He looked decidedly uncomfortable in her office, his large shoulders squared in the too-small chair as he exchanged stink eyes with Willoughby.

Still, despite his rough-around-the-edges presence, his gaze met hers head on, and he did not try to either ignore or ride roughshod over her. Instead, he listened, asked intelligent questions, and gave her concerns enough attention to acknowledge yet not magnify them.

And he did not bullshit. Magdalene appreciated it. He even managed to mollify George, who was usually hostile towards men. She made coffee as well as escorted him to all the places where the suspicious activities had occurred. Overall, if anyone was to poke around her school, Magdalene figured she could have done much worse and, in all honesty, probably couldn’t have done much better.

THE DAY PROGRESSED SLOWLY amidst interviews, photographs, arrangements for more interviews, and of all things, gossip. The latter came in the form of George running into her office, gesticulating wildly as if she was about to burst into flames at any moment, clearly flushed and panting from her run as was typical for her.

Magdalene looked up from examining the spreadsheets of the school’s finances, which still showed way too much red for her liking.

“Is the school on fire?” Magdalene gave her secretary a wry smile before once again bending over the paperwork. But George obviously had no scruples when it came to interrupting, especially since whatever it was must have been tantalizing, judging by the way she appeared to be ready to burst.

“Maggie! You need to come with me, now. Alden and Sam are conspiring.”

Well... The way she could feel the blood drain from her face, the school might *as well* have been on fire. George’s features, now alight with excitement—as they always were where juicy gossip was concerned—beamed at her with an obvious perverse pride in the news she had delivered, oblivious to the knife she had just plunged into Magdalene’s chest.

She stood up, her legs shaky, and against her better judgment—and despite yesterday’s assurances that she believed Sam—followed George down the hallway to Sam’s classroom on the second floor.

THE SMELL of paint hit her first, and she wanted to cry. It was supposed to be a surprise. She had ordered the painting of the classroom, among others, and sprucing up of the entire floor, tearing the funds away from other, far more important projects.

But what she had envisioned was how Sam’s face would light up, how she’d be the one to truly appreciate it. The only reaction that actually mattered to Magdalene.

And now... now that she had confessed to trusting her, acknowledged to herself how she was gone over this woman... What would be left if Sam was in cahoots with the Trustees? She’d have made a fool of herself. And why did it feel like that would be a much worse betrayal than Timothy’s?

Her breath was coming in ragged exhalations and next to her, George was still sporting that mercenary expression of someone who’d caught a thief red-handed. All Magdalene could think about was that this particular thief was stealing more than just her time and her trust.

They stood in silence—bar the all-consuming roar of anxiety in Magdalene’s ears—just outside the classroom, the flimsy door not doing much to preclude them from hearing the voices inside. But when she forced herself to listen, now past the noise of her pounding heart, what Magdalene

discerned was an uncharacteristic aggravation in that low, slightly hoarse voice that was so familiar to her.

“...I thought the trustees would show Headmistress Nox their full support, especially considering what she’s being exposed to by doing your bidding.”

Magdalene’s eyebrows shot up. There was so much accusation inherent in that hissed sentence, as if Sam was throwing it at Alden through gritted teeth. As if she was disgusted by their entire conversation. A few slow, heavy steps followed, but were halted by a louder proclamation filled with fierceness and a considerable amount of frustration.

“Isn’t that why you appointed her in the first place? Because Headmistress Fenway was running the school in a decidedly liberal direction, and the trustees disagreed with her vehemently? So you chose to bring in one of the most efficient reformers of private education institutions in the country who is famous for turning crumbling schools around. Why are you here now, thoroughly undermining her very presence at Dragons with these questions?”

Next to her, George gasped loudly, and Magdalene clamped a hand over her mouth. As moist lips hit her palm, she jerked back as George’s breath caught, her throat bobbing.

Magdalene chose to ignore the surprised expression on her secretary’s face. She needed to hear the end of this, and George was going to blow their cover.

“Go back to the office.” She mouthed the words, conscious of not giving her voice any volume. George’s shoulders drooped and she raised a hand, one finger extended like she was about to argue. But when Magdalene set her jaw and narrowed her eyes pointedly, George slunk away without another sound.

Alone, and now more curious than ever, Magdalene realized that she’d missed Alden’s reply, his voice no match for Sam’s accusatory, elevated tone. She didn’t catch what Sam said either, but the insult rang clear, and it must have acquired the intended target, because a few seconds later, Alden’s attempts at pacifying reached her ears.

“That’s not what I meant.”

Magdalene smiled. *Well, what did you mean, old man?*

She waited, motionless, for what would happen next, oblivious to anything except how her heart had lifted. In the space of a few minutes, she had undergone the transition from despair to this state of elation. Sam was standing by her! Sam was accusing Alden of throwing Magdalene under the

bus and essentially scapegoating her!

Dizziness settled over her, the relief making her stagger. Her heart in her throat, hammering wildly, Magdalene extended a hand and stumbled closer to the wall, the stone once again giving her succor and respite. And she felt not a little bit afraid. Terrified, if she was completely honest with herself. The power Sam had over her.

She trembled and was not entirely certain it was from fear alone. Her palms were damp, and she throbbed between her legs. God, the things Sam *did* to her without even knowing.

There was silence for a beat and then another inside the classroom. Surely, it was the scent of paint that was making Magdalene lightheaded. Or maybe it was the sheer exaltation of being propped up. Defended. For once, stood-by instead of betrayed. She leaned fully against the wall, her eyes closing to keep the sensation in for a little longer.

Amidst the silence, punctuated only by Magdalene's deliberate effort at breathing, Sam's voice, calm and collected, rang loudly.

"I think you need to drop by Headmistress Nox's office and express your concern for her and your support for her efforts for what they are, since you're the one who commissioned them."

Alden must have been pacing the classroom because the staccato of loud steps stopped suddenly.

"But you yourself don't support these efforts, Samantha." The surprise in his voice was evident. Magdalene felt a smile tug at the corners of her mouth before she drew her brows together.

And Samantha? Now this was curious...

"I don't support any of the reforms you, Joel, and Timothy Nox saddled the school with. Fewer extracurriculars? Fewer scholarships? We both know your ideal number of scholarships is zero, so don't bother arguing. What's next? Homemaking classes? Red capes? What I'm saying is that, while I don't agree with some of the ideas Headmistress Nox is implementing, I also don't believe you should punish her for flawlessly executing your own orders."

Before the impulse to rush in and kiss Sam senseless overpowered her, or either Sam or Alden could exit the classroom, Magdalene turned on her heel and walked away as quietly as she could. She had heard enough.

BEHIND THE GLASS of her office window, the afternoon was turning into a gloomy evening when a knock on her door made Willoughby hiss and assume his attack position on the windowsill.

Magdalene accompanied her quiet “come” with a gentle scratch to his ears and observed as her cat and the oldest trustee exchanged stares—one rather vicious, the other puzzled and apprehensive across the expanse of her office.

Alden shuffled his feet, and his mouth worked silently until Magdalene took pity on him. And he did look rather miserable.

“How can I help you, Mr. Alden?”

He gave her a long look, then moved forward and sat in the chair Sheriff Green had occupied earlier. The dichotomy between the two men couldn’t have been more stark, robust and frail, honest and wily. With one last scratch to Willoughby’s warm ear, Magdalene sat down. Pitiful or not, Alden held strings—strings she did not want him to pull. And his presence in her office, aside from having been goaded into it by Sam, meant one more thing. He wanted something.

“I see you’re not surprised I’m here, Mrs. Nox.”

The title grated, and she knew he’d used it on purpose. *Well, then.*

“There are few things that happen on this island and on the school grounds that I am not aware of, *Governor.*”

It was his turn to purse his lips in displeasure at her use of the appellation. Magdalene was aware—Candace made sure to keep her up to speed, at times even against her will—his second campaign for governorship was faltering. She also knew he was a conceited man who did not like to lose, hence his current position in the polls had to be particularly upsetting to him. She was not sorry to press on that wound.

Her own pulsated hard enough to make her want to touch it, but the Vacheron, the cold metal like a shackle on her wrist, kept her hand at her side. She’d give him nothing.

Alden stood, clearly unable to stay still, and took a step and then another, his long, lanky legs bringing him closer to her, the desk standing like a sentinel between them, a line of demarcation.

“I know you, Mrs. Nox.” His voice abraded her chest further. He said nothing else for a moment, like he was waiting for her to ask what he was referring to. Except she was well aware of what Stanton Alden meant. And she would not give him the satisfaction of seeing her react in any way. He

may have been very intimidating to the child, but grownup Magdalene knew better.

Her eyes searched his face, and when they reached their watery gray counterparts, something flashed in Magdalene's mind, something just out of reach. The eyes were both so very familiar, yet disturbingly foreign.

"You weren't wondering?" He coughed and covered his mouth with his bony hand. It shook slightly, and she observed him will it to stop.

"No, Governor. I wasn't wondering." Her restraint clearly bothered him. His shoulders tensed, he turned away from her, and proceeded to walk towards the window farthest from her desk. After a while, he cursed softly under his breath.

"Will you stop this, for heaven's sake?"

Magdalene looked on, graceful enough not to acknowledge in any way that her mission of unnerving him was thoroughly accomplished. She leaned back in her chair, crossing her legs, relaxed now that she had her opponent at her mercy.

"And what would your heaven ever do for me, Governor? It has been punishing me for ages. You think because a pious man such as yourself invokes it, it will suddenly change its mind about a sinner like myself?"

Grace be damned, she couldn't resist flashing a self-satisfied smile in his direction as she spoke, and he turned back to her in something akin to righteous indignation, only to reconsider after a few sputters.

"Blasphemy aside—"

"Oh Governor, I am all about blasphemy. Always have been. But then you knew that, didn't you?"

He looked away again, his hollowed cheeks looking like distressed paper, thin and fragile, not at all like the man who had once had all the power to rule the state and her world. Magdalene's heart remained entirely unbothered. Next to her, Willoughby stretched and turned on his back, paws in the air, insouciance itself. It gave her joy, how attuned they were after such a short time.

"Be that as it may, Magdalene. That is not why I hired you."

He might've been very good at poker, but calling her 'Magdalene' was his tell. At least she had gotten him to drop all pretenses. And to confess to what she had suspected all along. Stanton Alden was the one who had thrown her out of Dragons, and he was the one who'd brought her back.

She bit her lip. You couldn't really make this up, unless this was some

sort of sick twist of fate, deities having the time of their life drawing all sorts of geometrical figures about their life. Full circle, indeed.

“You hired me to destroy Dragons, *Alden*. Let’s not pretend otherwise.”

He coughed again, the sound raw, and Magdalene narrowed her eyes at him, only to have his arthritic fingers dismiss her concern.

“Never mind that. Never mind pretenses. I kept an eye on you, watched you rise, become who you are. And I knew you wanted this—”

“Look, I have no problem with wanting things. There are things I have coveted all my life. With all the practice I’ve had, I am very good at it.” She swallowed around the lump in her throat. Yes, there were a lot of things she desired.

Dragons, Sam, peace, home.

The realization settled around her like a shroud, and she moved her shoulder, allowing it to envelop her fully. It felt warm and safe. And right.

“You gave me Dragons, knowing full well what that meant to me. But it’s a poisonous gift, coming from you.”

He grimaced then. Magdalene was certain it was meant to be a smile. Instead it was a sad twitch of thin lips on a narrow face.

“I took Dragons away from you once, Magdalene. I can take it away from you again. I’d rather you didn’t make me.”

It was her turn to regale him with a smile of her own, just as sad as his. Threats didn’t sway her. Honestly, this man should have done better research. Or hired someone else.

“Alden, my contract is ironclad. I made sure it was. If the objectives outlined in that piece of paper aren’t met, I am out.”

“Then meet those objectives! Do something about the damn school. Something final. Close it. Certainly it shouldn’t be this hard!” His voice boomed loud, waking Willoughby who hissed and sat back on his haunches, ears up and alert, her not-so-little defender.

“Ah-ah-ah...” She unfolded from her chair, stood, and raised her chin, looking down at him. “How the school gets out of the red remains to be seen, Alden. I can close it and save you the money, or I can make it profitable, or at least self-sufficient, and eliminate your losses. That decision...” she inwardly stumbled, the idea finally hitting home full force, “is mine alone.”

“Then do it. Whichever. But I am tired of getting a barrage of complaints about this cursed place.” His face was pinched, the dull eyes weary. He paced like a caged animal now. Magdalene remained silent, allowing him to address

whatever else was on his mind, because while his earlier outburst may have been warranted, she highly doubted he'd have made the trip just because the Dragonettes were heckling him at his rallies.

Finally, he stopped in front of the closed door and hesitated, as if deciding whether to say something or leave. His shoulders drooped, and he finally spoke without looking at her, as if afraid to face her fully.

“And why aren't you ensuring the safety of the faculty?”

Interesting. Faculty. Samantha. *Sam.*

Her eyes narrowed. *What is your interest in her, old man?*

“I'm taking precautions. And law enforcement is fully appraised.” Then, because the entire conversation had been threaded with red lines, leading to this very moment, Magdalene gently placed what he seemed to have been seeking like a golden chalice between them. “And she has never been in any true danger.”

His head jerked up, and his pale hand on the door handle twitched. Still not looking at her, he murmured, “Ironclad contract or not, if anything happens to her, Magdalene, I will ruin you.” He shrugged his left shoulder and Magdalene's breath froze in her chest.

Of all the people...

“Stanton...” She had no idea what she wanted to say or why she was using his first name.

Sam. The orphan. Sam of sharp cheekbones, gray eyes, and a left shoulder shrug when confused or dismissive...

The revelation her mind had leapt to wasn't one to warrant more pity or concern. So why was she feeling precisely that? Magdalene had no idea whether he even realized what he'd said and how much he had divulged, what weapon he had placed in her hands.

When he turned to her one last time, the hand on the door handle trembled in earnest.

“Magdalene, the board will stand by you, as long as you stay the course.”

Her head swam from the pace of the conversation, the subject change leaving her reeling. She took a deep breath and tried to switch gears as well.

“So I have your support, then?”

His look was sharp.

“Some.”

With that, he was gone, and in her peripheral vision, Willoughby relaxed, his tail settling around his paws.

“*Some...*” She repeated the word, her lips twisting into a grimace of distaste. And yet, the exchange gave her so much food for thought. And uncovered so much. Stanton Alden. Sam Threadneedle. Magdalene Nox. It seemed the threads of fate were all tangled around the same thing, the same place. Dragons.

She gave the cat another pat and carefully set the newly revealed information aside. It wasn’t for her, even if she recognized how much advantage she could draw from it. She’d never hurt Sam, and she wondered if Alden realized it had been entirely safe to reveal such a secret to her, even if he’d done so inadvertently.

THE AMBER CLIFF met her with the salty fury of the ocean beneath it, the humid safety of the ivy and the fragrance of jasmine still lingering in the late summer air. Magdalene inhaled the scents of all three and allowed her tense shoulders to relax. Beside her, Willoughby stretched on the mossy knoll.

She watched without seeing as the waves chased each other to their perdition at the foot of the cliff; the motion setting her frayed emotions at ease.

Alden’s visit had allayed some fear she’d not been aware she was holding close. And above all, Sam’s support meant the world to her. Her steadfast loyalty to Dragons frequently irked Magdalene, but her decency, before all else, made it impossible to be truly angry with her. And that decency had been on full display today when—as devoted as she was to Dragons and for all her conviction that Magdalene did not have its best interests at heart—she had still defended what was right and stood up to Alden.

What was right...

Magdalene herself felt like she’d done what was right earlier. When faced with a choice of promising to close the school, to obey her employer, she hedged. She realized that it wasn’t about obeying, not about the contrarian in her—no matter how ornery she could be on occasion, especially when a man was involved. No, her epiphany ran deeper.

What felt right was to decide. She was to be the one who would make the final call on what would happen to Dragons. And despite still awaiting the results of the audit and the financial advice as to which, if any, avenues of

investment were available, in her heart, Magdalene knew what that decision would be.

She not only *could* save the school, her skills being what they were, but she also had the power to do so. In her mind, Magdalene heard her own words ring perfectly true.

The decision is mine alone...

As the Eye of the Dragon's beacon lit in the distance, she took a deep breath, the wound in her chest singing with the effort, tendons, and muscles stretching to accommodate the newfound fullness.

The wind ruffled her hair, and the feeling of having it tickle her cheeks in just this manner was so familiar, so comforting. Magdalene closed her eyes and finally allowed the memory to bloom fully, a peony opening up, all gentle pinks and blushing reds.

She had stood here before, holding back tears, on the brink of being cast out, and these same gusts of salty air had blown through her hair. It had been longer then. And she had been younger. But she had been home then, and she was home now.

And it wasn't at all a wonder that Sam's relentless defense of Dragons, of stone and rock and soul, was something that brought them together, bound them, and matched them in their quest for home.

Home.

A sob escaped unbidden, shocking her in its intensity. An ivy branch under her fingers curled into her palm, satiny leaves thick and comforting. Her heart beat loudly in her ears again, the realization that the past thirty years had not been in vain, had not been a mere obsession, causing the tears that her sixteen-year-old self had kept at bay that day to finally spill.

Magdalene let them. It felt cathartic. The weight of the years had lifted, as if blown by the same wind that was drying her tears. She faced it head on with the scents and sounds of home surrounding her, propping her up, strengthening her resolve.

She turned around, the tempest now behind her. The Eye of the Dragon illuminating from afar the dark silhouette of the building in front of her.

In the encroaching darkness and by the beam of the distant lighthouse, Dragons looked majestic, the rot and decay invisible in the waning light. The cracks in the walls and the sagging of the roof. And so Magdalene saw it as it once had been—the creation of the old masters, the masons and the carpenters from two centuries ago, a work of art, of wood and stone. But above all, a

home. *Hers.*

She wasn't aware that she was holding her breath. She wasn't aware that the ivy in her hand was now cradled to her chest, or that Willoughby, perhaps sensing the gravitas of the moment, was suddenly quiet and still at her ankles. All Magdalene knew was that she was home. And that home was safe with her.

OF FALLING IN LOVE & PUCCINI'S VIOLINS

*H*er feet seemed to take her where she didn't even realize she wanted to go. One moment she was standing on Amber Cliff, staring the tempest in the eye, and the next she was shaking out her umbrella and knocking on a now familiar door in the faculty quarters.

Her heart hammered in her throat, the pulse beating a faltering tattoo. Of all the places to go, Magdalene had ended up at this door, and she licked her dry lips as she realized why. She didn't go to George, her friend, her confidante. She went to Sam. She went to Sam because, out of every soul on this island, she was the one who would understand how Magdalene felt. Because Sam, too, loved this place like no other, and like no other, she saw Magdalene.

When the door opened, Willoughby waltzed in without as much as a backward glance at her, unceremoniously winding his way past Sam—who no longer seemed surprised at seeing him—and made himself very much at home in a chair where her ratty sweatshirt was bunched up. It looked soft, though...

Magdalene shook her head as the thought came and went and watched the cat make biscuits on it for a moment before he settled down with a large yawn.

When she turned her gaze back to their host, standing calmly in the doorway—a picture of amusement and sensuality in perfect repose, a shoulder propped on its frame—the air slowly left Magdalene's lungs, to be replaced with the pure elixir of elation. And yet the sight of Sam, her presence, and that subtle scent that was lily of the valley and woman, settled her skittering heart, soothed the raw edges of her emotions that the day had

stripped bare. The lanky body, long and lean, the endless legs, the nonchalant pose, made Magdalene want to rub herself up against her like her cat. It was such a cliché. *She* was such a cliché. Any moment now, there would be trumpets.

No, not trumpets, what nonsense. Surely Puccini. Violins.

Because when one falls in love, they get Puccini as their soundtrack. Turandot. Nessun Dorma. And if she didn't get that to accompany her falling all the way into this honeyed feeling, both sticky and sweet and golden, like the woman in front of her, then Magdalene would be forced to file a complaint.

Because the woman was bejeweled in the evening's stormy dusk and candlelight, and Magdalene was in love.

It was such a curious feeling. Magdalene had been walking towards it for months, and now that she had arrived, the journey was finally making sense. Every step she took led her here, to this room bathed in candlelight and shadows, to the rain weeping against the windows outside, to this woman looking at her with such adoration and so much welcome. This beautiful human, honest, loyal, stubborn... Goddess, even the stubbornness was hot. She'd genuflect any second now.

She took a deep breath. Being in love was no reason to make a fool of herself, even if Sam was magnificent. Framed in that eerie light of the dim lamps and candles Magdalene had learned Sam preferred, caressed by the subtle scent that so reminded her of something just out of reach, something warm and lovely, she looked ethereal.

Looking back, years later, Magdalene would feel like she had been thoroughly outplayed. Like a champion boxer missing a perfectly executed strategic gambit. Because it had all the markings of a combo punch in boxing. A jab—Sam's staunch defense and Magdalene's heart lifting, finally trusting fully. A cross—the realization that Dragons had been her home all along. And an uppercut—finding love in the most improbable of places, at the most inconvenient of times, and in the most perfect person.

Standing here now, in the old drafty hallway, it only took Magdalene one look—one long look—at the small smile playing on Sam's lips, to realize that she had been approaching this very moment, teetering on this very brink, since the first time she'd set eyes on Sam inside the smoky Manhattan bar.

Koi no yokan...

The age-old Japanese concept, the one that meant falling in love, not at

first sight, but knowing it would come if only given a second glance. A deeper, more meaningful one. Hadn't she felt all those possibilities, all those probabilities in that elevator, in that shadowy hotel room, under the caresses of these gentle, sure hands?

She must have known, because the words, the name of what she'd been experiencing in those moments, had been on the tip of her tongue even then.

Magdalene smiled, amused at herself now, still standing, swaying slightly in her four-inch heels which, she supposed, could be blamed for appearing drunkenly, loopily in love, completely swept away by the force of her realization and her emotion. And wasn't it a wonder how perfectly her love for Sam mirrored her love for Dragons?

STILL, she was Magdalene Nox, and love was no reason to stay in the cold and wet and draft. She raised an eyebrow, waiting for Sam to beckon her inside. Once allowed entrance, with her host's simple gesture of moving aside and closing the door behind them, she decided not to beat around this particular bush and share what had transpired earlier.

In light of the bombshell Alden had given her a glimpse of during their meeting, Magdalene felt on somewhat shaky ground. She had to tread carefully. First of all, she didn't know anything for certain. Second, she could be wrong about this entire parentage revelation. And third, Sam could end up being so hurt, especially if she was as clueless on this as she appeared to be, and that was anathema to Magdalene. Thus, she chose to sidestep this bit of information entirely and focus on her own issue with the oldest trustee.

Sam's gaze was expectant, and Magdalene wanted to preempt any hint of concern that was sure to take over those expressive eyes at any moment otherwise.

"You wouldn't believe who visited me today, Sam."

Sam's lips thinned. "If you tell me Stanton Alden deigned to grace you with his illustrious company, that wouldn't be a surprise. He stopped by earlier, I know. His insouciance cloaked in concern stopped flying with me years ago, back when I was a kid. I don't know why he expects things to have changed in the last oh... give or take fifteen years."

So she had been right that Alden's visit had upset Sam. Magdalene didn't

take any pleasure in her own astuteness. There must have been more to Sam's conversation with Alden that she had missed, and Magdalene felt vindicated to have stuck to school business now. Some things were better left to rest for a while, especially if they could have rather ominous repercussions. So she took a deep breath, nodded and schooled her voice.

"Indeed. I was offered some support from the trustees in these trying times."

Sam stared at her for a second before rolling her eyes.

"Some?"

"Well, just enough to know that, for now, my position is secure, but I should take better care of my staff. He made a very strong emphasis on me protecting and safekeeping my staff."

"I guess as my former guardian, he's trying to act all protective."

"And yet, I haven't seen much closeness between you."

Magdalene took a step towards Sam and captured her hand. Her mind was reeling. All her protective instincts were riled up.

How could this man be so callous towards someone as wonderful as Sam?

"No, I told you about breaking Joel's nose when I was a kid. I wasn't invited to either of their mansions for holidays ever again. Up until now, we've barely exchanged greetings when he or the younger Tullinger set foot on Dragons. And they rarely have, before this summer's upheaval."

This was starting to tread into dangerous waters... A subject change was needed.

"Hm, I like you calling me 'an upheaval.'" Sam smiled at Magdalene's attempt at humor, then gasped when Magdalene began to carefully inspect her injured hand. Her own feelings now clear to her, it felt natural to reach for Sam's hand, whether to check for injuries as she was doing now, or to simply hold it palm to palm. They fit so well here too, their fingers similarly long, perfectly suited for each other...

"I'm fine, I'm fine." Sam tried to pull away, but at Magdalene's pointed glare, stopped trying to yank her hand out of Magdalene's hold.

"So you keep telling people, Sam."

At the mention of 'people,' Sam's mouth dropped open. Magdalene sighed before confessing.

"Yes, George overheard you talking to him. Or well, some of your conversation before I caught her and made her stop eavesdropping."

Technically, it was not exactly the truth, since George was the one who'd come running to her, full of giddiness at the prospect of sharing what she had overheard, but Magdalene felt it was in bad form to reveal just how big of a gossip her friend was. So this little white, harmless bending of the truth would have to do.

"Ah..." Clearly lost for words, Sam seemed to begin to relax under the delicate ministrations of Magdalene's fingertips on her palm.

"Are you really fine though?" Magdalene gave the injured paw a long once-over and gentled her fingers further.

"I'm getting there." Sam's voice was hoarse, whether from exhaustion or from their proximity, Magdalene couldn't guess. And so she chose to keep talking, to see where this already surprising day would take both of them. She wanted to bask in the glory that was Sam's company longer, to stretch out the moment as much as she could.

"I may or may not have stayed behind after shooing George away and finished the eavesdropping job she started?" Magdalene looked up at Sam, seeing some of the sparkle reflected back at her in those bright depths. "I am quite astounded by your generosity, Sam. You defended me when you could've told an already wavering man what he came here to hear. And we both know he wanted to hear you tell him how badly I'm affecting the school. Do you trust me then not to spell the end of Dragons? Or is this your... infatuation speaking?"

They simply gazed at each other. A tender meeting of eyes, their hands still skin to skin. What a privilege it was to just be here like this, in this room, in this peace. Hadn't she been searching for this? Magdalene blinked, but the moment, instead of flickering out like an extinguished candle, stretched on.

In the hallway, with Sam and Alden's voices just a few feet away, Magdalene had been so certain of Sam riding to her rescue, defending her, yet now she suddenly felt shy and in need of reassurance. Or maybe she just wanted to hear Sam say it out loud.

"I guess I'm rather transparent about that infatuation, then." Sam, once again, tried to extract her hand and fall back on a joke, but Magdalene held on, still waiting for that reassurance, and Sam tsked before speaking, eyes serious now.

"Yeah, okay, I'm not saying you win, because I still don't believe that half of what you're proposing is ideal for Dragons, but I've looked deep enough and long enough now to see that you are an instrument of their will

and you're doing your best in a situation that is pretty rough all around and in which the ideal is ultimately unreachable. But I'm also aware that you are implementing a great number of good practices that people don't even notice because they're too entrenched in hating everything you propose."

Magdalene released the breath she'd been holding. She had gotten exactly what she wanted. She did narrow her eyes slightly at Sam's inference that she was a mere tool, but decided to let it go. Sam, brow furrowed, looked steadily at her.

"I still have questions, mind you."

It was Magdalene's turn to tsk in exasperation.

"Of course you do. You wouldn't be you without questions, Sam. It keeps me on my toes. Keeps other people on their toes too, I suppose, since so many of them seem to be very interested in your business and mine. All this eavesdropping—and I assure you, mine was entirely out of self-preservation—but I couldn't help but overhear that part of your and Alden's conversation while trying to remove George from her favorite pastime. You mounting a rather noble defense of my character and my mission here at Dragons..."

Sam gave her a goofy smile, and Magdalene wanted to prop up her chin and merely gaze at her and sigh.

She was so smitten...

"Well, let's just say it was sweet of you, Sam. But with all the people skulking around, their intentions good, bad, or otherwise, it spurred me on to refuse Sheriff Green to question anyone here at Dragons. So starting tomorrow, the faculty and students will travel to the mainland to talk to him at his office. I can't trust that our walls will allow for enough privacy to ensure people feel unencumbered to speak freely. Orla and Joanne will go tomorrow, and I will take the scholarship girls the next day. I foresee that interviewing the girls might take longer, so we will be staying overnight. You and the rest of the faculty are free to make your own arrangements with the Sheriff's office."

Sam's eyebrows almost reached her hairline.

"You're taking six girls alone? That tells me all I need to know about how long it's been since you last supervised kids directly. They'll drive you ragged in a matter of minutes."

Magdalene just smiled. Her little spider's web all but set.

"Well, if you volunteer your services..."

Sam threw her hands up, exasperated.

“Of course I’ll go with you. You’ll need all the help you can get with them. They’re rascals, especially Amanda and Lily. They’ll want to go to every store and try on all the clothes, only to go back for more of the same the next morning. Believe me, been there, done that.”

“All right then, that’s settled,” Magdalene said as breezily as she could and resumed making lazy circles on Sam’s hand, periodically venturing to caress her wrist and causing Sam’s breath to hitch and her own heart to go hazy with longing. She could feel Sam relax and lean into the caress before suddenly straightening up.

“Wait, stop, I can’t think when you touch me.” Magdalene bit her lip, trying to contain a smile. Sam’s eyes widened as realization dawned. “This was a setup! You wanted me to go with you.”

Magdalene tried to look innocent, but she knew she wasn’t quite pulling it off. Still, she gave it an honest try.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. All these accusations! If this is what I’m to contend with, I might as well go shopping with Lily all by myself, rather than endure this kind of suspicion from you.” Magdalene let go of Sam’s hand and clutched her own theatrically to her chest.

“Suspicion? You tricked me! With your caresses and your perfume... And just being here with me... Like this.” Sam waved her now free hand between them.

Dropping the pretense, Magdalene sat at the desk and placed her chin on her hand, watching Sam from under half-lidded eyes. She was so beautiful, breathtaking, really. A study in angular grace in motion.

“Are you saying that I used my feminine wiles to tempt you, Sam?” She made sure to lower her voice an entire octave. If Sam thought Magdalene would play fair, she should have known better by now...

“Ah, I don’t think you need wiles.”

Magdalene could swear she saw Sam shiver, and it made her want to lick her lips.

“Are you certain?” Magdalene hadn’t moved, her chin still resting on her folded palm. She could see right through Sam.

“What was the question again?” Sam looked unsteady, punch drunk, and as Magdalene continued to observe her, something shifted on that sculpted face, anguish suddenly apparent. Magdalene sat up and lowered her palm to the desk, knowing she must have crossed a line somewhere.

“I’m sorry, Sam. I shouldn’t tease you. Especially when I can’t follow

through.”

“You don’t want to follow through,” Sam corrected with enough force to make Magdalene flinch. No, the school was no place for proceeding with what she really wanted to do to and with Sam. She had a vague idea, a blurry sort of plan, and mostly it was all hope, giving her nascent feelings oxygen to burn as bright as they did. But no matter what would happen, it could not happen on the island. They both still had too much to lose.

Suddenly breathing heavily, Sam looked very tired, yet quite determined at the same time. A dangerous combination, and Magdalene knew she had been pushing, the love and lust clouding her mind. She had to escape while she still had the willpower to do so, especially in light of all the revelations and emotional upheaval she had been through tonight. Love was not easy, after all.

“Be that as it may. Thank you for agreeing to go with me and the girls. I’ll let you know when I make the arrangements.”

Magdalene made to leave, but visibly angry now, perhaps at being dismissed so easily, Sam caught her elbow, making her stumble, then pinned her back against a nearby wall, capturing her.

Magdalene wanted to deny this feeling of being swallowed whole by the moment, but it was too much, sweeping her up like an undertow. Déjà vu had nothing on the two of them. They had stood in this room before, in each other’s arms, breathing each other’s air, yet they might as well have been light-years apart then. But now? Now Magdalene felt unmoored.

The distrust was in the past, the fear of letting go seemed to belong there as well. She wanted and she was desired back, and just as strongly, by someone who was more than a match for her will, for her lust, for her intensity, if the hunger displayed in Sam’s eyes was anything to go by.

And the trust, earned, tested, quenched like metal in oil by Alden’s visit, by weeks of orbiting and resisting each other, that trust magnified everything. In sharp relief, her own feelings and wants, needs, her own hunger, stood apart from her, as if another person in this room, demanding to be satisfied, demanding to be heard, to be given its due.

She should have run away while she still could, because her time was up. They were face to face, front to front, breathing rapidly, their proximity sparkling with electricity, and *this* spark, Magdalene knew, had enough voltage to hurt them both. To singe them forever, because the sheer strength of their connection was such as to make this a once-in-a-lifetime bond.

Magdalene gulped. No, there was no dislodging the thought and the realization, because she simply knew. If this went sideways, if this did not work out, if it ended in betrayal, they would never recover, they would never be whole again.

She closed her eyes for a second, but her thoughts scattered, leaving her vulnerable, exposed, and entirely honest in her rawness.

Nothing to hold back...

Their breaths mingled, Sam's lily-of-the-valley scent, the subtle aroma of it, wrapped itself around Magdalene's mind, making it further impossible to begin to contemplate moving, unless it was in one direction only... She inhaled deeply, like a diver right at breaking the water's surface before plunging to either death or glory, and brought their mouths together in a bruising kiss that indeed didn't hold anything back.

There was no pretense anymore. None. Even if she had wanted to hide something, to conceal a corner of her soul, this woman had never given her a foothold to do so, anyway. She had always taken everything, wrung her dry, and thrown her on the shore, an empty husk of total bliss.

And so Sam was once again true to herself. Hands delved into Magdalene's hair just as her own fingers tugged and raked, the simple elastic holding up Sam's ponytail no match for her sheer determination to feel that honeyed silk.

When their tongues touched, Sam whimpered. Magdalene gentled her ardor, sucking tenderly, yet somehow knowing this one move turned the heat up tenfold. Sam's unrestricted pleasure at the gesture seemed to only ignite her further, and Magdalene tipped up Sam's chin, exposing her neck, and biting with enough enthusiasm, oblivious, no, determined to leave a mark. The thought of Sam walking around the school sporting it as a brand, exciting her, making her achingly wet, making her want to climb out of her skin and lose herself in Sam. She bit again, then her tongue followed, soothing the spot, but judging by Sam's response—those hips that did not stop moving and grinding into her own—only managed to inflame further.

Still, her being in control was short-lived, and she reveled in Sam wrestling it back, hands abandoning Magdalene's hair and traveling downward, seeking purchase on her hips before moving lower still. Fingers dragged up her thighs, raising her skirt up, inch by inch, exposing her stocking and garters and the lace and silk of her lingerie, and suddenly the look on Sam's face was almost absurdly comical in its stupor. Great gulps of

air coming in short puffs, pupils blown, Sam blinked at her.

“Please don’t tell me you walk around the school like this... I may never be able to function again.” Magdalene chuckled but almost choked on it as Sam dropped to her knees and looked up at her with such hunger, all previous traces of surprise wiped away by need and total command of the situation. Hell, of *her*.

At the simple sight of having Sam at her feet, she moaned, and it was Sam’s turn to laugh. Very slowly, as if determined to ruin Magdalene once and forever, Sam hiked the skirt a few inches higher, her single-minded determination only making Magdalene grow weaker and more desperate, and fully exposed a barely there lacy thong. Magdalene knew the lace had to be wet, bearing witness to the state this woman had gotten her into with just a few kisses.

God help me...

Clearly mesmerized by the wet silk and lace, Sam leaned forward and Magdalene forced herself not to close her eyes, wanting to see the sinful mouth connect with her overheated skin—

The knock on the door just a couple of feet away made both of them jump, then freeze.

“Sam? Are you home? Is Magdalene with you?” George’s muffled voice had the effect of a cold shower. Magdalene let her head fall against the wall behind her, trying to get her breathing under control. Sam, still on her knees, lowered her forehead onto one of Magdalene’s stocking-clad thighs, and she dropped her hands to cradle her there, heart fluttering in her chest like a caged bird devoid of an escape route. She ran her fingers through the tangled silky locks until George stopped knocking and her receding steps could be heard departing the hallway in front of Sam’s apartment.

When the silence was absolute, Magdalene took a deep breath and carefully tugged on Sam’s hand, pulling her from her knees. She looked at the shadowed face, so full of longing, and despite wanting to say so many things, stepped aside and proceeded to set her skirt to rights. Sam did not budge, her own attire requiring no repairs.

But the distress on Sam’s face was so raw, so open, and Magdalene’s cup ran over. She took a few steps back and was once again face to face with all that naked misery. Only this time, unable to withstand it, she was compelled to act. Magdalene leaned in gently and placed a kiss on Sam’s cheek, hoping it would express everything her heart and her mind had no words to convey.

Not now, not when she could feel herself breaking through the shell she'd built around her innermost self for decades.

Too vulnerable, too open. She retracted her earlier step forward, then beckoned Willoughby with a now customary gesture that he recognized very well. One snap of her fingers and he meowed in compliance, falling in step with her as they vacated the room filled with everything Magdalene wanted. In fact, she was certain she had never desired anything more than the lone figure standing in the doorway watching her go.

Deep breaths were supposed to calm her down, and Magdalene took some, tentative as they were, but as she pushed open the door to her own apartment, she knew not much would steady her anymore. Hope and some careful planning were in order.

OF MAINLAND RECONNECTIONS & NEEDED CONFESSIONS

She got to see both her hopes and her plans realized, after all. The ferry, the endless interviews with law enforcement, the dinner. And above all, that red line anchored in both their chests, on their fourth ribs, right above their hearts, was now taut as a bowstring. There would have been no escaping it, even if she hadn't actively maneuvered their entire day to lead to this very moment. Because Sam was equally as resolute, even if less consistent, in her own planning. She was a doer, and damn the torpedoes. She just blew past doors and walls and carefully laid plans. Thank God theirs were so perfectly aligned.

"Sam... Sam... Sam... What am I going to do with you?"

Knuckle deep inside a trembling Sam—trembling so hard, in fact, Magdalene thought her lover would come apart at the seams—that question she had posed earlier, half-jokingly, at the mainland diner where they'd spent their evening with the girls, was surely absurd.

When they'd taken the ferry from Dragons to Chatham, as they waited for the students to give their testimony to Sheriff Green and his deputies, and while they ate burgers and salad, sitting on red Americana faux-leather seats, Magdalene had known the answer to this question.

Now that they'd both made their plans and their choices, and Sam's walls were clenching around her thrusting fingers, Magdalene thought back to the very few words they'd exchanged on shore. Specifically how, despite her walking out of Sam's room the night before, despite her leaving both of them wanting and hungry, each of them had known they'd end up exactly here. Against a door, in the cozy bed-and-breakfast, trying to keep a modicum of quiet and desperate to devour one another.

Yes, it had been Magdalene's fingers that trembled only an hour ago when Sam boldly insisted she make a choice. And yes, she'd had to look into those gray eyes, seeing how deadly serious they were, and will her hand to steady as she placed it in Sam's warm, sure one.

And when Sam demanded express consent, always so mindful of it, her "Now say yes..." did something illegal to Magdalene's insides.

Was there ever anything more sensual than the way Sam did not even phrase it as a question? It was a statement. One of profound intent, one that demanded an equally powerful answer. And, despite the earlier wobble of trembling hands, Magdalene's voice did not waver.

"I already did," was her sole reply, and the streets of Chatham were all a blur, along with the hallways of their B&B, and even to a certain extent her own devouring of Sam.

She'd been determined to call the shots the moment they'd crossed the threshold, and she had, to her surprise, with Sam allowing her total control, total domination. And it blurred her vision at the corners, the hunger of months and months, years, lifetimes, returning tenfold and taking over her mind and her hands. Her lips.

Magdalene surfaced as Sam shook in her arms, half surprised to hear her own voice, still steady, if slightly hoarse, whispering nonsensical words of encouragement in the delicate ear, periodically peppering every inch of skin she could reach with little nips and kisses. She couldn't stop touching, could not stop feeling. It was like waking up, like opening one's eyes for the very first time.

One hand still covered the sensual, panting mouth, having kept Sam mostly quiet through what surely would have been screams of pleasure, and the fingers of the other continued to gently pump inside the heat and the wet of Sam which belonged only to her.

She wasn't certain when she'd started thinking in those proprietary terms, but as Sam lifted limp arms to grasp her shoulders and slowly pulled her even closer, naked skin on silk blouse, and kissed her lazily—more a meeting of mouths than an actual kiss—Magdalene felt angry at every single person who had ever touched Sam. Who had looked at her and not seen the beauty, the astonishing strength and passion hiding in the depths of those wondrous eyes.

It was fine, though. It didn't matter, because Sam was hers now, and she'd make damn certain she would never feel like anything but the most

cherished woman in the world.

Sam seemed to have gone under yet again, and Magdalene held her up, still leaning against the wall, reveling in the opportunity to caress her face, to play with the disheveled strands of her hair that, in the dim light of the room, looked uncharacteristically dark.

Sam's body didn't stir, still comfortably ensconced in Magdalene's arms, but she felt a smile against that sensitive spot on her neck and wanted to both squirm away and hold Sam's face closer, to revel in the sensation of those lips on her skin, of that grin, warming her up from the inside, of that joy reflected in her own.

"What's so funny?" Magdalene allowed herself to draw back just enough to glance at Sam's face, which looked so happy, Magdalene's heart squeezed in her chest. She was so in love and it felt amazing, this fullness, this warmth, this bliss.

"You have a thing for hair?" Sam finally straightened entirely and shucked off the jeans still clinging to her ankles, impeded by her Chucks. The expression on her face was unfathomable, then suddenly became questioning, calculating, and it was more than just Magdalene's heart that squeezed.

With a sly smile, Magdalene ran her fingers through Sam's blonde tresses, further disheveling them.

"I never did, but I can't help it with you." She looked at Sam for a long while before closing her eyes. It really irked her that this woman could so easily read her in moments like these, like an open book—which she had never, ever been in her life. Did she really want to be one now? And did she even have a choice?

She was tempted to shake her head, because no, there wasn't a choice. Clothed or undressed, what she desired was to be fully naked in front of Sam, raw emotions, painful decades-old obsessions, spasming and bleeding wounds and all. And so she answered truthfully. "I can't seem to help myself with a lot of things when it comes to you."

As if sensing the gravity of the moment, Sam reached out gingerly, as though not to interrupt the revelation, and began unbuttoning Magdalene's blouse.

"I told myself that I was going to only have one drink at the bar, and then I couldn't help but take you up on that whiskey, only to be completely taken by you in your room. Later, I told myself that I could work side by side with you and not be swept up by your mind and your heart and those brilliant eyes

and your goofy, endearing wit.”

Magdalene leaned in again and kissed her hard. She wanted to smirk, to triumph, Sam staring at her, flushed and blinking, clearly dumbfounded, that lower lip swollen and abused by Magdalene’s teeth. As signature moves went, Magdalene knew it was lethal, and Sam had been annihilated by it every single time. Granted, she—like the proverbial phoenix—burst into flames only to rise from the ashes, and Magdalene trembled in anticipation of that resurrection.

But for now, as the astute eyes watched her with a somewhat far away expression, Magdalene continued, the compulsion to keep sharing her heart and her mind, overwhelming her. “I told myself that you hate me and everything I stand for, and that you did not trust me. And then you go and defend me to Alden and to Orla and to pretty much anyone who dares to besmirch what is left of my professional virtue. And.. and... and... There is always an ‘and’ where you’re concerned, Sam. You are always going above and beyond... Sometimes underneath?”

Magdalene actually giggled at her own pun, and Sam’s face lost that far-away expression. Instead, actual tears sprang to her eyes, and Magdalene reached to wipe them away, only for Sam’s intentions and emotions to flip on a dime. Sam’s nimble fingers began to unfasten the tiny little buttons on Magdalene’s blouse at double speed. It was too much, she couldn’t take it. The time for conversation and confession was over, and she’d be damned if some piece of couture would stop her.

With a swift move, Magdalene grasped the two parts of fabric and tugged, rending them. Sam admired the lace of the bra for a moment, then gulped, throat working down and up, and Magdalene felt dizzy. Her body half exposed now, she had to express her final thought, had to give it voice, because she knew the tether of reason would soon snap. One second more and she’d beg.

“I can’t pretend I don’t want you, Sam. I keep telling myself all sorts of lies these days, but I can’t go on believing that one anymore.”

Magdalene held her breath as Sam ran her palms up and down the revealed expanse of her abdomen, making her shiver, tracing muscle before lowering her head and kissing where her fingers had been, slowly inching up to where lace did nothing to obscure Magdalene’s breasts that felt a hundred times more sensitive than ever before.

Sam simply took charge. It was a familiar rhythm, of being thrown

overboard and battered by the waves until she was an exposed nerve, raw and shivering and indeed begging. And Sam hadn't even touched her anywhere she truly wanted her to yet. Instead, she'd just watched, that gaze knowing, powerful, holding the mysteries of the universe in those ashen irises.

Magdalene closed her eyes as Sam leaned closer and exhaled a breath across her overheated skin, and she felt the nipple pebble at this sensation alone.

"You know how many times I touched myself, imagining my mouth on these?" Magdalene's breath caught, and it was her turn to throw her head back with a loud, tortured moan.

"Saaaam..."

Visibly encouraged by the reaction, Sam went on. "Do you know that I couldn't get enough of fantasizing about how responsive your breasts are? How I was absolutely sure that I could make you come just by licking and biting and sucking on them..." Magdalene's entire body vibrated, and Sam hadn't even touched the tightly furled buds now straining towards her mouth, still encased in the tatters of ivory.

Oh yes, raw and shivering and begging...

"Please..." The word seemed to unlock something in Sam, and she took the nipple closest to her between her lips, sucking at it, teasing it against the now wet lace, the scrape of which only heightened Magdalene's response.

Half out of her mind with lust, Magdalene moved with desperation against that mouth, nails raking Sam's back, surely leaving marks. Switching breasts, Sam finally relented and tore at the remnants of the bra, careless with the delicate lace that she'd admired only moments ago.

Magdalene wanted to laugh, and she would have if she had enough breath for it. Because as the ivory impeded her access to Magdalene's skin, Sam actually growled, and it became blatantly obvious her hunger could no longer be contained, that it had shaken off what was left of its confines.

The vision, Sam, hungry, a little desperate, eyes full of unrestrained desire, tore at Magdalene, and when Sam's lips closed around the now fully exposed nipple seconds later, Magdalene had to slap both of her hands over her mouth in order to muffle a scream that almost broke free. Undeterred, Sam sucked harder, and when Magdalene's knees began to give out, she pulled her further into the room and toppled her onto the bed before following.

With Sam's body holding her down, Magdalene felt like a bowstring,

ready to snap at any moment, wavering at the very precipice. One sharper bite, one lingering caress, and she'd freefall into ecstasy.

Except Sam clearly had other plans, because her lips lifted off Magdalene's breasts, and Magdalene was suddenly chilled in the cool air of the room, naked, exposed, and vulnerable in ways she had not experienced in years.

But before she could ask anything, before she could even process her own need to cover up, or else be disappointed, Sam's nose nudged up her chin and their lips met, warm and giving and enticing, and the hands that were rough and gentle, combining the best of both worlds, pulled away the rest of her tattered clothing before fully pushing her onto the bed.

Magdalene acquiesced, but not until her hands found Sam's face and they gazed at each other, amber and blue on gray, submission turning into the need to take. When Magdalene's fingers dropped, Sam moved downward, kissing and nipping at the hip bones or the line between hip and pelvis while Magdalene held her breath. As Sam glanced up, their eyes met again, and their connection, like an electric current, like wildfire, ran between them, as dangerous and lethal as it was undeniable. When Magdalene closed her lids and let out a sigh of surrender, Sam's mouth descended.

AFTER, they lay in the dark for what seemed like hours, though judging by the deep blackness outside the haphazardly drawn curtains, it must not have been even close to morning yet.

She was relaxed, and she felt something that she hadn't in years. Happiness. The pure, unadulterated kind of joy that only comes with freedom, with achieving the summit of one's desires, of having faith and receiving it in return. Magdalene stretched like a cat and glanced at the shoulder blade she'd been propping her head on just seconds ago.

She ran her fingers over the smooth expanse of skin and, to her surprise, in the dim light of the room, a scattering of freckles greeted her on the sharp planes of muscle and bone.

Instantly enchanted, because Sam had none on her face, Magdalene pressed her lips to one, then to another, tenderness overwhelming her. How was it possible to feel this much for one person?

Sam sighed happily under her ministrations, and Magdalene lifted her face, suddenly and completely overcome by affection and not a little silliness.

“One... Two... Three...” Her fingers moved slowly over silky skin, cataloging her newfound treasure. Sam, sleepy and still dazed after her second orgasm, that Magdalene had made sure to draw out for as long as she could, squirmed a bit.

“Wha...”

Magdalene continued counting, trying to focus despite all that softness and all that adorable sleepiness that begged her to burrow in and never let go. The thought of ‘never letting go’ that would have scared her breathless not long ago did not abrade her or make her as raw as she had expected it to.

Oh, you’re so in love, Magdalene...

“Shhh... You’re going to make me lose count. Seventeen, eighteen, wait, was it seventeen? Dammit, look what you’ve done, you made me lose track indeed.” Magdalene smiled then, showing a frowning Sam she really wasn’t really upset. With bewilderment written all over Sam’s face, Magdalene leaned in and kissed her on the nose before settling back on her side.

“I was counting your freckles.” She grinned and continued to trace her treasures, feeling light and young and free.

Sam gaped at her, and to say she—much to Magdalene's delight—looked even more stunned was an understatement. But there was something else shining through, so clearly, so bright it would surely blind Magdalene any moment now...

She recognized that expression, the emotion, the truth of it for what it was. And she was certain Sam knew it, too. Was cognizant that it was that very moment when she, herself, fell.

Magdalene reached out and wrapped Sam in her arms, feeling the ragged breath whoosh in and out, and then, degree by degree, as if slowly submitting to the newfound reality, Sam relaxed in her arms. Should she confess now? Should she say that Sam was very much loved in return? Or should she wait for Sam to come to her, to fully grasp the emotion and the implications before making her move?

It felt like the moment belonged to Sam, and Magdalene did not want to steal the limelight by overwhelming her lover. Her chance would come. After all, they had all the time in the world. For love and for confessions.

The silence stretched between them, but far from being uncomfortable, it

was filled with the enormity of Sam's realization and Magdalene's continuous gentle caresses bringing contentment to their cocoon. After a while, Sam turned on her back and caught Magdalene's wandering hand, kissing and nipping at each fingertip, making Magdalene throw her head back and release a peel of laughter.

The sense of peace and joy made her brave, and she knew while time for love may yet be stretched in front of them, the moment for at least one confession was right now.

Magdalene propped her face on her palm and looked down at Sam, who eyed her carefully. Of course, she'd be able to read her. Of course, she would know. Her vaunted poker face was entirely useless when it came to Sam. It rankled a little.

"Must you?" Sam interrupted the unhappy utterance that was about to be on its way.

"I must, Sam. I must." But she stayed silent a bit longer and instead just cuddled closer, right into Sam's ready embrace, putting her head on Sam's shoulder and squeezing her tight. She felt silly. It wasn't even that big a deal. Sure, it explained a lot about so many important and not at all important things in both her life and the life at Dragons and, by extension, Sam's...

Well, maybe it was a big deal after all.

A deep breath, a kiss to Sam's shoulder, and she laid the words on the wrinkled sheets between them.

"Whatever they may have put in my file as their reason for ending my probationary period as a student at Dragons was a lie, Sam. They threw me out for kissing a girl."

OF FERRY RIDES & BEAUTIFUL REWARDS

“Will you let me be the person who is here for you and, darling, who just waits for you?”

Sam’s words, as they’d lain in bed, sated and so full of each other, echoed in her ears as she watched the ferry glide over the tumultuous ocean. The wind battered at her, but she still felt enveloped in Sam’s scent and that voice, low and steady, seemed to hold her captive just as much as the waves did.

Sam had fully committed to her. Despite the many obstacles, despite the split loyalties. Magdalene brought a hand to her sternum, the remainder of the pain there feeling less acute and somehow sweet.

Sam’s words, her earnest admission, her support, gave her such peace. Magdalene knew she had found something then, something that she’d never had before. A safe harbor. In those arms that held her—as she’d cried for her fractured youth, for her vaunted ambitions, for the seemingly insurmountable obstacles she’d faced, and for her shattered dreams—she had found a haven. Safety. Security. And love. Sam had not said it. But Magdalene knew. And it had made her cry even more, the sobs wrecking her as she’d cradled her own unconfessed love to her ravaged chest.

Where had this woman been all her life? The age difference notwithstanding, why was fate bringing them together at a time when Magdalene was torn in so many directions? And why, when her entire life’s ambition was laid before her and there for the taking, was Magdalene risking total ruin instead?

She knew the reason, though. For those words. For those caresses. For that safe harbor that only one other thing had ever provided. In the distance,

covered by early morning fog, she could barely make out the shapes of her dragons. The cliffs stood proud, sentinels over their treasure, guarding what she cared for so much.

She sensed more than saw a figure break from the gaggle of noisy girls standing in a huddle twenty feet away from her, and within a few seconds, the sound of light steps, sure even on this unsteady deck, brought their mistress to her. The scent of lily of the valley teased her with its fresh subtlety.

“I can’t seem to stay away. I know I promised to.”

The voice was bashful, but Magdalene had learned to discern now between actual shyness and desire. And it was the latter that had her shiver slightly and tug on her shawl, to pretend to cover up her tremble.

Sam raised her hand to take off her jacket, but Magdalene stopped her with a quickly murmured, “I’m not cold,” under her breath.

No, she wasn’t cold. And no, Sam wasn’t slow on the uptake, if that smirk was anything to go by.

“I see...”

Oh boy, was Magdalene ever in trouble or what? She could feel arousal pooling low in her abdomen. How was she supposed to do anything, to function like a full-fledged, responsible adult with duties and authority, if the low voice alone made her want to drop to her knees and bury her face in the wet and the heat and the scent that was Sam and Sam alone?

Sam raised an eyebrow but did not push the issue, a look of something unreadable crossing her face as she gazed straight ahead towards the fast-approaching island.

This time, Magdalene chose not to say anything, to instead wait her out, and after a few minutes of companionable silence, Sam spoke up.

“I slept very little last night...”

It was Magdalene’s turn to smirk. She leaned into the lasciviousness of the gesture only to see Sam flush red, cheeks catching fire under the steady gust of the wind.

“No, not like that...” The voice lowered further, and the blush deepened endearingly. Magdalene curled her fingers into her palms, so hungry to trace those flaming cheekbones, to feel that fire on her own skin. But as she focused on Magdalene’s restrained hands, Sam coughed, bit her lip, then visibly struggled to continue. “I mean, yes, I left you pretty late, and I was exhausted, but I couldn’t fall asleep. I kept thinking about what you said...”

After...”

She stumbled over the words, clearly trying to find ways to express herself without mentioning specifics in case anyone overheard. She didn't have to worry. Magdalene cast an imperious glance around them, but the girls were still giggling amongst themselves, oblivious to the world, as any self-respecting and self-involved teenager would be. Bar the gaggle, there was nobody else on the ferry.

Sam seemed to follow her gaze, and Magdalene could see her shoulders relax. She gripped the bannister with both hands. Judging by the way the thumbs caressed the cold metal, Magdalene assumed it was more to give them something to do than out of fear.

“I kept thinking about what happened to you, Magdalene. At the hands of those people. At the hands of Alden.”

Hearing Sam mention him specifically, Magdalene cast a furtive sideways glance at her, but there was no awareness, no particular inflection as Sam dropped the name like a stick of dynamite with a lit fuse on the deck between them.

“What were you thinking about in particular, darling?”

The endearment slipped out, but she didn't regret it. If anything, she was slightly embarrassed by how much she wanted to call Sam all sorts of silly, cute pet names, and how much she basked in the glory of being able to. So despite making her voice sound distant and slightly disinterested, as Sam stared ahead, Magdalene knew she wasn't fooling her lover.

“You shared your story with me yesterday. How they ultimately took out their puritanical hypocrisy on a child.” Sam shuddered, and the knuckles on the railing turned white under Magdalene's eyes. “And now these very people... they call you names, send you dead rats and wilted flowers. They all demonize you, but they can't see that they made you who you are.”

Magdalene's lips parted slightly, then she let out a breath she hadn't been aware she was holding—like a total romance novel cliché—and placed her hand on the railing next to Sam's. The warmth from the skin and the cold snap of the steel beneath her fingertips were a welcome contrast.

“Are you saying I'm a demon?” She tried to deflect it all with a joke because Sam was getting perilously close to her very soul, and she was afraid Sam wouldn't like what she saw there.

Sam's smile was sad, and Magdalene knew her attempt at humor hadn't landed. She would not be allowed to take the easy route.

“You were just a child. One who was effectuating change. Like that proverbial pebble that causes the ripple effect.” Silence reigned for a long moment before Sam’s words shattered it. “You know who the demons are that people fear the most? The innocents they condemned to hell. And make no mistake, they all fear you.”

Magdalene wished she’d been looking at Sam as the words left her lips. They felt like a slap. They felt like a caress. They felt like benediction and absolution and something so much more desired. Understanding. This woman understood her on a level Magdalene had never been before, never been truly seen.

“I don’t know what to say...”

Sam’s laughter was devoid of mirth once again.

“I’m not certain there is anything to say. The sheer amount of unfairness, of hurt, they unleashed on you, that they continue to unleash...” Tears trembled on the almost colorless lashes.

The deck grew quiet in the howling wind, and Magdalene turned to observe it empty, the girls having moved to the cabin.

“I asked you yesterday, darling, if you were crying for the scrawny, freckle-faced teenager who was thrown out of heaven. You said no. Are you crying for her now?” Magdalene lifted her hand, and as her fingers reached Sam’s cheek, the tears spilled, warming her fingertips.

“And I think I said—I mumbled something incoherent, and probably not even remotely true, and you changed the subject. But I was then and I am now.”

“Oh, Sam, that kid did all right...”

Sam caught the hand still lingering on her cheekbone, and her eyes no longer held any tears. They sparked with a new light. Vehemence. Determination. Anger.

“Who cried for you, Magdalene? Who cried for you then? For the wronged teen and now for the stalked and harassed woman? Tell me. And not who was permitted to, because you may not let anyone in, then or now, but who actually genuinely wanted to? Your mother? Your husband?”

Sam’s words, like bullets, pierced Magdalene’s already shaky defenses, crumbling now like castles of sand under the onslaught of the ocean.

No, nobody had mourned her loss of innocence...

“And why would you allow anyone? Why?” Sam’s hold on her hand was painful, but Magdalene did not dare tug her fingers away. “They fucking

threw a child out like trash, and now they all fear you'll come back and they will not only have to repent, but pay. And so they come after you still, because that penance may be just a bit too steep for them."

"Sam..."

"Yeah..." The full-blown pout she was met with in response was one for the books, and Magdalene laughed, her chest so full of warmth and elation and love, she almost missed how that bleeding wound she carried felt smaller, the muscles and tendons slowly stitching together.

She'd think about this later, about this fanciful foolishness of hers, and about the immense amount of trust she was placing into the gentle hands that held hers so carefully. She'd think and think, but her treacherous heart had already done its pondering. It beat, attuned to the one in Sam's chest. It beat, and maybe for the first time in years, Magdalene did not register the pain of brewing revenge. Rather, she noticed hope and strength.

Sam had been slowly healing her, closing her wounds as she was opening her heart. And wasn't that a wonder? As her laughter died down, her smile remained. Another miracle. All because of this person, the one and only. *Her one and only.*

"My Sam to the rescue. Nobody was there, but you're here now. And I am nobody's victim. Maybe then, but certainly not now."

Despite the warmth and the solace they gave her, Magdalene gently freed her fingers from Sam's hold. Some things she would do alone. But it was amazing to feel propped up, supported. To feel that, even if she walked by herself, the treacherous road still led to the light in Sam's window, and that Sam would be there, waiting.

"It has been a long time since I've carried a responsibility as big as this. And an even longer time since I've allowed others to make my decisions, Sam. I just want you to trust me. And I want none of this to ever come between us. Believe in me enough to let me make all of this right."

Sam nodded, her eyes hooded now. Magdalene caught her chin between two fingers and turned her face fully towards her.

"Do you believe me, Sam?"

Sam lifted Magdalene's fingertips to her lips, sealing the deal, and before Magdalene could say anything, Sam nipped at the middle one.

"Yes, I believe you, Magdalene, and I believe *in* you." Another nip, a sharper one, prompting Magdalene to blink and a shiver to run up her spine. "And while you do what needs to be done, I will be right here. I promised

you last night. But you are asking me again, in the light of day, with Dragons gazing from a distance. So I will promise you here as well.”

Sam sucked the index finger into her mouth, robbing Magdalene of breath entirely, before releasing it, the smile on her face broad and sly.

“I mean, what kind of lesbian cliché would we be if we didn’t discuss the same issues ad nauseam?”

Lust still clouded Magdalene’s vision, but Sam deserved some retribution, so she leaned in and, with her breath hot against Sam’s skin, bit down not so gently on the spot where jaw meets neck, before pressing her lips to the delicate ear and whispering, every word a caress against the sensitive shell. “I am not certain what kind of cliché you are, darling, but I am a bisexual one.”

Sam’s eyes looked dazed, and there was a bruise already blooming red on her neck, making Magdalene quite proud of her handiwork.

“You should probably consider wearing a turtleneck for a few days, darling.”

With a wave of her hand towards the mark she left, Magdalene took a step back, then another before she twirled around and started towards the cabin. Chances were, the teens were being rowdy and interfering with the crew—if they hadn’t yet commandeered the vessel altogether. She should probably check who was actually the captain now.

When she crossed the threshold into the cabin, Lily was wearing the captain’s hat, and Magdalene had to bite her lip to keep the smile from emerging, lest she encourage the already thoroughly confident girl. But Lily saw through the attempt at subterfuge and giggled, the sound so pure and innocent and joyful, Magdalene just watched as the rest of the girls joined in, basking in the light of their unburdened happiness, knowing her own was just a few feet away, brooding on the deck, all golden in the morning sunshine.

With the cliffs now looming closer through the cabin windows and the school’s main building safely ensconced behind the towering sentinels, Magdalene looked at the treasure and joy surrounding her, and her vow to defend, to protect, to set everything right, had never been more imperative, her purpose never more important.

“Do your worst...” Her murmur was too quiet for anyone to hear, but Magdalene felt the surge of power from at last committing to her goal fully, and assuming all the risk that was sure to entail. Still, as she turned to gaze at Sam coming towards her, the ocean waves rocking the ferry and the island

almost within reach, Magdalene couldn't hide her satisfied grin. Some perils came with the most beautiful rewards.

OF CONCERNED FRIENDS & BLACKBERRY JAM

Now that she had made a decision, Magdalene threw herself into saving Dragons with everything she had. She sent a massive ‘thank you’ to Magdalene from a month ago, when, despite being intent on revenge and destruction, she’d had the excellent foresight to not actually make any permanently damaging decisions.

As it stood, Dragons needed a rather considerable cash infusion, and it needed it immediately. It also required even more considerable slashing of existing expenses, in addition to what she had already announced. This was a task Magdalene dreaded at certain moments—because for the first time ever, it felt like she was cutting into a living organism—and one she not so secretly relished on other occasions, because it pissed off Fenway.

With an immutable line drawn in the sand, that neither Sam nor her would risk their positions at the school by being improper, Magdalene only had so much enjoyment left in her life, and making Orla turn purple by prompting the veins to pop on that skinny neck Magdalene wanted to wring at times, was one of her more exhilarating activities. Noisy, but exhilarating nonetheless.

“I have no idea how you even got this job, Nox! Wait! Hold on, I know *exactly* how you got it!” Orla stood in the middle of Magdalene’s office, after barging in on her meeting with David Uttley, who was quietly observing, perched on the edge of the small conference table strewn with the spreadsheets they were discussing.

Magdalene set her jaw. She still didn’t like him. Above all, she still didn’t trust him, considering nothing exonerated him from being the one behind the string of decidedly unpleasant—to say the least—events. Magdalene jutted

out her chin as she thought about how he continued to watch Sam with those sad little eyes full of yearning. The same eyes that gave Magdalene the occasional mean, dark look he would then swiftly control.

Nonetheless, she appreciated that he was civil, professional and, above all, very good at his job. His department ran like clockwork, and he was quite useful when it came to advice about cutting spending. Dispassionate. Unlike Sam, who was all passion, all fire, desire...

Dammit... Back to the task at hand, Nox!

That task at hand was a screaming Orla, who seemed to be accusing her of something nefarious. Or simply immoral. Whatever her point of contention was today.

Magdalene raised an eyebrow, and next to her, Uttley shrank back, able to recognize her moods by now.

Smart.

He did, however, not budge despite the flinching, and Magdalene almost rolled her eyes.

Nosy.

Which also made him not smart. After all, what did he have to be curious about? Her spats with Orla were infamous and overheard by pretty much everyone within earshot. She was tempted to sigh, but that would have been a sign of weakness in front of these two.

“Well, if you are intimating that I slept with a trustee, Doctor Fenway, then yes, I did... For years, in fact, I believe it’s called *marriage*.” She infused her voice with as much sarcasm and poison as she could muster and watched as the veins in Orla’s forehead and neck did indeed pop. So satisfying.

Before Orla could retort, Magdalene’s landline rang, and her smile only grew sharper when Orla glanced at the display, no doubt as familiar with the number of the island’s Town Hall as Magdalene was by now. Excellent. That side of things was moving swimmingly.

Good, old hag, keep thinking your angry thoughts.

“Mr. Mayor!”

Magdalene waved her hand at Orla and Uttley as a not-so-subtle hint to vacate her office. The expressions of utmost contempt, discontent, and unsatisfied curiosity on their faces warmed her heart.

As she was hanging up, George sauntered into the office, arms—per usual—filled with a plethora of files, notebooks, and haphazard pieces of paper.

How she made any sense of that chaos, Magdalene did not know, but some things were better left unquestioned. George was a highly efficient secretary. The little Southern spark plug ran her office like a well-oiled machine.

“The workers have finished moving the archives to the attic, Maggie.”

The appellation that no one ever used, and certainly nobody else ever dared, still abraded her ears. She didn’t care for it and had to resist the urge to grind her teeth every time George availed herself of it. Magdalene recognized that her affection for the woman and a desire to not offend the small number of people she tolerated had prompted her to put up with things that she perhaps shouldn’t have.

Her old therapist would be proud, because, emboldened by her spat with Fenway, Magdalene straightened up. She had made a decision.

“Dr. Moore, the day shall come when I will ask George to stop calling me Maggie...”

Before she could speak, George, efficient as always, began rattling off a list. “The meeting with the townies is all but confirmed for early next week. The minutes of the latest Transition Committee meeting are in your email for your approval, and I will file them as soon as you give the okay. The contracts for land-use you asked me to look up are in this folder and the ones regarding personnel files are in the boxes in my office. Finally, the visit to the town veterinarian for Willoughby’s followup regarding his weight is set for Saturday.”

... but today shall not be that day, Dr. Moore.

George was indeed efficient. But, although normally very well-tolerated by Willoughby, she was currently not his favorite person. The tomcat made a point of turning his back on the secretary and pretended to clean himself. Very interesting parts of himself. Since the cat had no middle finger, Magdalene supposed this was his way of telling George what he thought of her making said appointment.

Still, he *was* slightly overweight, and Magdalene wanted to cross all the t’s and dot all the i’s to make sure he was healthy. She tried hiding or limiting the number of treats she gave him each evening, but so far, he deployed his deadliest weapon against Magdalene, to which she had not yet found a meaningful defense. He would bump his massive head against her and purr, before extending his paw and gently laying it on her hand. The emotional manipulation was off the charts. And she was a total sucker for it. The best and the worst part? They both knew it.

In the quiet of the office, Willoughby's disgruntled growls as he kept cleaning himself were the only sound. With a blink, Magdalene belatedly realized she had been staring at George for perhaps some time now, and her secretary was watching her with this strange, faraway expression. Hopefully, George wasn't coming down with anything. They were both too busy these days to be sick.

Magdalene tilted her head, giving herself another second to try to decipher whatever she had seen on her secretary's face before she spoke, but recognition eluded her. Something was there. Something...

"I don't think I tell you often enough that you are amazing, George."

The smile that bloomed on her secretary's face was wide and happy, all teeth and bashfulness.

"What are friends for, Maggie?"

It wasn't an odd response, per se. They were close, despite Magdalene withholding certain details about her life. Yet she shivered and realized her foot had been tapping a rapid tattoo under her desk. Magdalene took a breath and deliberately crossed her legs, halting the motion. Maybe it was because they had barely shared a meal for almost two months now, since they'd stepped onto the island at the end of the school year with Magdalene's time, like pie, being sliced too thin, consumed by so many others who needed and demanded to see her.

And then there was Sam. Fierce, lovely, beautiful Sam, who did not demand, but whom Magdalene wanted to spend time with most of all.

Her face must have given something away, because now George squinted at her, all the while chewing on her lip, her expression distinctly calculating. And Magdalene knew it was time to change the subject.

A smile plastered on her face, she forged ahead. "Friendship aside, you have been invaluable, George. And speaking of valuable things. I made a decision. During that meeting early next week, we shall tell the Mayor and the Town Council that Viridescent Cliff and its tower would be the projects to pursue. And then we will go from there."

George frowned but predictably, her eyes were filled with malice.

"Fenway will hate it. She'll rally the Dragonettes, burn you in effigy or something. And it's been a while since we've had dead rats delivered."

As if in disgust, Willoughby sneezed, then rolled over and made a tight cat loaf.

Magdalene appreciated that George took the harassment to heart. But she

just wanted it to stop, despite knowing full well that the series of decisions and solutions she had devised and implemented to save the school—all of which she would announce in a few weeks' time—would only make the appearance of dead rodents and assorted other threats a more constant occurrence in her office.

Talk about tough, unpopular choices...

But she would save her home. Sam's home. She drummed her fingers on the dark oak and her voice was quiet when she spoke. "We will cross that bridge when we get to it."

George scowled, opened her mouth, then closed it again, and rather than speak, set the files on the table before clearly throwing caution to the wind.

"Well, I think you have already arrived at said bridge, Maggie. And it doesn't matter what you decide, there is no way that woman will ever approve. In fact, you are damned if you do and damned if you don't, because she hates you. I have never seen such disdain in my life as in the eyes of that woman every time she looks at you. No matter what you accomplish, it's never enough, and every time you achieve what she herself is actually fighting for, she just gets angrier."

The lack of acknowledgement of her accomplishments wasn't anything new. Magdalene blinked, and the years of animosity, dislike and distrust marched past her mind's eye like occupying soldiers. She always took pride in her work. She was very successful at it, after all, but the work itself was never kind. Seeing the institutions she had rehabbed flourish was gratifying, but the hounding was getting to be too much. Orla Fenway was very much the rule and not the exception where Magdalene's career was concerned.

Worry was etched on George's face, and Magdalene stood up and gave her a gentle shoulder squeeze, trying to allay the concern, but also to move things along. They'd had this type of conversation many times before. George was preaching to the choir and doing it often.

"Well, Orla Fenway has been making me jump through hoops and then setting them on fire since my first day here, George—"

"You should have fired her, Maggie, dammit, you should have fired her. She is a danger to you!"

The vehemence of the words and the tone surprised Magdalene, but she decided to ignore it. George wanted what was best for her, ultimately, and she tended to be very intense about the people she liked and disliked.

"I still can and will fire her if her behavior crosses the line."

The moment the words left her mouth, she knew they were a barefaced lie. She kept the less-than-esteemed Orla Fenway at Dragons solely because it made Sam happy. Was it a good decision professionally and for the institution? Debatable. Orla was highly combative and a thorough pain to work with. But she was also a brilliant teacher if Magdalene's conversations with the students were anything to go by. And above all, Sam loved her. And if keeping her around meant she could make Sam smile? Well, she'd burn the whole world just to make sure Sam was happy.

Magdalene turned towards the windowsill, afraid her face might give something away. She had finally grasped her own love for Dragons, and that had been the impulse behind her newfound verve to save it, but there was no escaping the thought that a large part of her motivation to preserve this beloved heap of dirt and rust was due to no one but Sam Threadneedle. To one day hopefully make a home with her. Here, on Dragons, since they both felt this was their place under the sun. Dragons' survival was imperative to her—for her own sake and for the sake of the students, faculty and the island itself. And for Sam.

She shook her head, trying to disperse these thoughts, and wondered why her mind had even gone there.

A little too soon for a U-Haul, don't you think?

Deciding that it was a consideration for another day, Magdalene snapped her fingers, and Willoughby obediently raised his big blockhead and stretched. His body made a rather loud, ungraceful thump as he jumped off his pillow, but his pudgy legs kept up with her nonetheless as Magdalene made her way out of the office and to a much-needed late breakfast. Maybe sustenance would help her focus on something other than Sam Threadneedle. Whose slim hips would grind into Magdalene's thigh, seeking pleasure... Or whose long, sure fingers would then bring said pleasure to Magdalene. Or that sensual mouth, the way those lips would tease and torment before granting her release...

Dammit!

AS SHE AND Willoughby entered the Mess Hall, however, all possibility of foregoing thinking about the one who'd had her heart and other parts of her

anatomy enraptured for months now evaporated. There she was, tall, lanky, in her ratty jeans, even rattier Chucks, and that flannel shirt that Magdalene wanted to burn, because nobody should make a garment that old and that cliché look this sexy.

And Sam managed to make the entire ensemble debonair and effortless instead of sloppy. It looked chic and put together. And Sam... God, Sam looked good enough to eat. Those long-fingered hands held on to a coffee mug, the eyes half closed, inhaling the life-giving aroma, and those lips... Damp from the hot liquid, plump, so kissable... Magdalene wanted to run up and lick them, taste the drops lingering on them, bite the lower one, draw blood, leave a mark.

Well, that had escalated quickly.

She rubbed her palm over her racing heart, then once again snapped her fingers at Willoughby, who was sitting near her on his haunches, waiting patiently for his mistress to decide what to do.

Orla and Joanne were huddled at one end of the faculty table, but Magdalene would be damned if she'd give them the satisfaction of leaving now that she was halfway into the Mess Hall, halfway to hungry, and all the way wet.

Willoughby, who'd perked up at her finger snap, followed her line of sight and slowly trotted towards the pillow on the sunny windowsill. They'd be staying.

Sam met her eyes for a moment, promptly turned pink, and after a mumbled something resembling "good morning", sat down towards the center of the long table.

Well, at least Sam was still clear-minded enough to understand the subtleties of subterfuge. She couldn't sit with Orla and Joanne, because Magdalene would not be able to follow her there. On the other hand, she also couldn't occupy the opposite end, since it would be too sharp a message that she was separating herself from the others. The middle was neutral ground, and Magdalene herself often occupied it.

Like she did today, after first carefully doctoring her own coffee—no more milk, thank you very much—and grabbing a piece of toast and some butter from the ice-tub on the breakfast bar. Upon second glance, a new jam selection was spread out for the faculty to determine the supply for next year. And it gave Magdalene a possibly impossibly dirty idea. Dirty, but oh-so hot...

As she sat down between the two groups of Mess Hall occupants, she caught the tail end of the conversation between Joanne and Sam, singing praises to the blackberry jam. Both women had enjoyed the dark gooey delicacy, and just as Joanne opened her mouth after she'd been chewing her lip for some time, Magdalene interrupted the silent sipping of her coffee with an opening salvo of, "I wasn't expecting the taste, it starts just a little tangy with this lingering sweet undertone. The sweetness stays with you."

Sam promptly choked on her toast, covered in that very blackberry jam. Magdalene hid her smirk behind her coffee mug, and Joanne and Orla were left staring uncomprehendingly between the two of them.

Well then, mission accomplished. Magdalene spread some more jam on her toast and stole a sideways glance at Sam, now entirely crimson, struggling to draw breath, holding on to her coffee mug for dear life.

She tried not to grin, failed, allowed it to bloom on her face, and made sure Sam saw it before schooling her features. How could Sam *not* choke when Magdalene's comment had clearly landed precisely the way she had intended—with Sam's profuse blush, certain to be remembering the same thing she was. How they'd both been naked and relaxed on the debauched bed-and-breakfast bed, as Magdalene ran the tips of her fingers up and down the length of Sam's slit while she lay there in complete post-orgasmic bliss, only to be roused by the sound of her lover licking and sucking each and every finger?

Magdalene remembered how the color had risen in Sam's cheek then, too, and how she'd tried to hide her face in the pillow, but Magdalene hadn't allowed her. Instead, she'd kissed her deeply, letting Sam taste herself, and it made Sam blush an even deeper shade of crimson.

"You can be such an adorable prude, Sam." Magdalene lowered her voice further, enjoying the effect it had on the already flustered Sam, tugging at the corners of her mouth as well as eliciting a flutter in her stomach. "I noticed this about you the first time we were together. You don't relax entirely when I go down on you. You love it, but there is that initial reluctance, as if you think I might not like what I find. It takes you a bit to overcome that mental barrier. I don't think you came by my mouth in Manhattan, and I certainly had to take you by surprise earlier tonight to make you let go under my lips."

Sam whispered something incoherent and burrowed into Magdalene's embrace. But Magdalene was not to be deterred. Instead, she demonstratively licked her lips and continued.

“Let me tell you what you taste like, darling.” She slipped her fingers between Sam’s legs, making her gasp, but Sam kept her eyes open, watching Magdalene watch her.

“I was looking for a word earlier, to describe to you the flavor that is uniquely you. I couldn’t come up with anything that was even remotely adequate, because you are delectable, and the taste is just so complex. It’s very subtle, and it starts just a little tangy with this lingering sweet undertone. The sweetness stays with you.” Magdalene played with her at a leisurely pace, then descended to Sam’s opening, thrusting once, twice, with eerie precision. When the thumb entered into play, making slow purposeful circles around that clit, Sam had finally closed her eyes, and Magdalene no longer hid her smug smile. She relished the duality of this woman. The way she took Magdalene apart with confidence and dominance in a manner that absolutely nobody else even dared dream about, and the way she surrendered so entirely, so completely, submitting to Magdalene’s every desire.

In the brightness of the late-morning Mess Hall, Magdalene delighted in the way the light and blush played on Sam’s sharp cheekbones and how those eyes looked at her with a slow burning gaze, positive that the gears were turning in Sam’s mind about the retribution Magdalene would have to endure. Oh, and endure it she would, with utmost dedication to the task at hand. Or at mouth... Magdalene squirmed and rubbed her foot along her own calf.

She watched Willoughby stretch and bask in the sun and wanted to follow suit. A sense of peace she had been missing her entire life washed over her. No, she wasn’t safe. Not with whomever was hunting her still out there. And no, she had not yet accomplished her task, because the school was just as imperiled as before, and the beginning of the new semester fast approaching.

But the warmth in her heart was spreading throughout her veins, mending hurts, stitching together muscle and bone, and giving her something she had not felt in years, perhaps since she’d been that scrawny, ginger outcast.
Hope.

Sam was giving her hope, and wasn’t it a wonder?

OF HORNETS' NESTS & UNEXPECTED REVELATIONS

The trouble with poking hornets' nests is that, fun as it may be, then one actually had to deal with the angry hornets.

Magdalene watched the crowd in front of her from the specially installed podium at one end of the quad and marveled at how pretty much everyone in this sea of humanity hated her. With the notable exception of Sam, who stood nervously next to Joanne, shoulders thrown back and biting her lip, the rest of this mass of humans exuded a decidedly negative energy. She scoffed. By the end of the day, some would hate her even more, and wasn't that a delightful surprise? Life did not have nearly enough of those, she mused as she cast another narrow-eyed glance around.

Yet the day had begun with a few. Magdalene was savoring the post-morning-yoga burn in her relaxed muscles, daydreaming about the cup of coffee she'd soon inhale, when the first of those surprises materialized in the form of a phone call. Her mother, of all people.

And while Magdalene would never consider Candace delightful, her call, no less, was a surprise that turned into a memorable conversation. Not a passive-aggressive talk about Magdalene doing something or other for her. No rambling about parties and men. In fact, her mother's voice had been devoid of much emotion, except one.

"I am concerned for you, my girl."

Well, and therein lay the surprise.

"Mother—"

"Do not 'mother' me, Magdalene!" Now concern was laced with actual distress, and Magdalene decided it must be serious, since Candace hardly ever exhibited either of these emotions. Well, one time, when a seamstress

had taken off too much of the hem of her vintage Dior gown and Magdalene had thought Candace would faint in a fit of ‘the vapors’.

They were silent for a while, and for once, Magdalene got the sense that the quiet was companionable rather than adverse.

“They are all gunning for you, my girl.” Candace eventually breathed out the sentence, and the distress rang loud and clear despite her actually whispering. “The Old Dragonettes! The bored housewives, the damn socialites, all these useless people who never gave two shits about that damned dump of a school. Suddenly, at every party, at every ridiculous event, all they talk is about how you’re destroying their precious fucking pile of mossy stones. And how they’ll make you pay. I damn near ripped Babette Donald’s face off!”

Well, Candace swearing? Magdalene actually blinked, taken aback.

“Mom...” The rare appellation took the wind out of Candace’s sails, and she quieted down as Magdalene suspected she would.

“Last time you called me ‘mom’, you were nineteen, and I found you crying in your room over that bitch, Dolores Evergreen Lopez.” Magdalene suppressed a gasp. Candace’s voice, still barely above a whisper, held all the malice Magdalene knew her to be capable of. But it was the words themselves that took her aback. Her mother knew about Dolores? And ‘that bitch?’

“Mom, what are you talking about? She was your best friend—”

The answer was so swift and vehement, it rocked Magdalene to the core.

“She seduced my daughter under my own roof. And then she dumped you. If you think I would have let her do either of those things and not drown her in a fucking pool of fucking consequences, Magdalene, I don’t know what to tell you.”

Magdalene barely had time to process what she was hearing.

“Mom... but she left Boston. Last I heard, she was in Mississippi, of all places.”

Candace tsked, and Magdalene could just picture her polishing her nails on her blouse, the characteristic pause telling.

“My girl, making sure she was never again received in any society on the East or West Coast, was a very small price for her to pay for breaking your heart.”

The matter-of-fact tone, the nonchalance of the delivery, yet the weight of the world in those words. A world where her mother had not only known,

seen, but also destroyed a woman for hurting Magdalene. Her fingers were gripping the windowsill so hard, her knuckles had turned white. She took a steadying breath, trying to calm her racing heart. Would wonders never cease?

“You ruined Dolores Evergreen...” She heard the surprise and bewilderment in her own voice. Her mother must have, too, because there was a heavy sigh, followed by more silence, before Candace spoke again.

“I’d have ruined her ten times over, Magdalene, if I could have spared you the pain. You were so heartbroken.”

“You sent me to Paris alone! Again!”

“And you had a nice trip! Don’t tell me you wanted me to join you? You were eighteen, old enough. This time, you didn’t need a nanny to go with you. And I was getting married to... Maurice?” The question mark at the end of her mother’s retort was so loud, Magdalene barked out a laugh. Even with a gun to her head, she wouldn’t be able to remember which husband her mother was talking about, and it was pretty clear Candace herself wasn’t sure either.

“Well, mom, I don’t know what to say...”

“I don’t need you to speak, Magdalene!” More tsks, some mumbled swearing, and another heavy sigh followed. “Just be careful. I don’t care about that pile of rocks. I care about you being safe, and those people are damn zealots. Religious fanatics. Joel Tullinger thinks he is some kind of second coming. I don’t know how that’s possible, since his wife has no idea what coming even means.”

A shocked pause followed, then both of them burst into laughter.

“Mom!”

“Nothing but the truth, my girl. But he is a zealot, and he and his ilk want us to return to their puritan roots. Also, Stanton better think twice before he starts spouting his 17th century rhetoric about a woman’s place as well. I have already donated to his opponent. And I will go canvassing door to door if I have to, but he will not be governor again.”

The image of her mother, in her four-inch heels—her mother who had never walked further than to her town car or the conservatory at the far recesses of whatever current estate—going door to door and cursing Alden, almost made Magdalene erupt into another round of laughter. The entire conversation was so out-of-character, so surprisingly warm and supportive, Magdalene wanted to pinch herself.

“I know you probably have to go.” Absolutely unreal, since when did her mother worry about keeping someone on the phone? “And I’d have come to that cursed island for your first day, my girl, but I have my manicure and massage in a few hours, and Shawn has amazing hands. You understand. Be careful now.”

The phone disconnected, and Magdalene found herself grinning like a fool. Now this was the Candace she knew, screwing her massage therapist. Nonetheless, the revelation that her mother had ruined her best friend’s life for hurting Magdalene, and the knowledge that she was concerned enough to most certainly go after Alden if this entire thing went south today, had been surprising. And important.

Magdalene had placed her hand over her sternum, the emptiness slowly filling as she’d felt warmth spread through her limbs.

THE SECOND SURPRISE of the day had been less startling. She’d barely finished her call with her mother when a hiss from Willoughby was followed by a knock on her apartment door. The tom stood up and stretched, ready for the intruder.

“My hero,” she gave him a chin scratch, as much pacifying him as praising, and he meowed something distinctly profane when she opened the door. She wanted to cuss herself when she saw Timothy in all his finery, diamond cufflinks sparkling in the early morning sun, the angle of the rays coming from the window hitting them just right.

He gave her his most charming smile that wavered a bit as he took her in.

“Something wrong with my face, Timothy?” She let him pass and closed the door behind him with a quiet click. Willoughby did not care for loud noises.

As she passed through the living room to the little breakfast nook that held his treats, the tension between the males in the room was palpable. Timothy looked agape at the immense pillow on the couch, clearly demarking the position of the cat in the household, and his expression only intensified when Magdalene brought Willoughby a morsel before snapping her fingers and pointing towards the bedroom.

He gently took the offering out of her fingers and trotted where

Magdalene had indicated, another massive pillow awaiting him by her bed. Still, he took a rather accurate swipe at Timothy's ankle as he passed him, all the while gingerly carrying his well-deserved delicacy in his mouth.

Magdalene mentally high-fived him. Timothy really should have known better than to show up at 7:00AM on the day she had the entire world in her hair.

Regardless, for spectacle value alone, this was quite entertaining as her ex-husband yelped and jumped, trying to avoid sharp claws, and Willoughby—rather proud of his efforts—demonstratively slowed his steps further as he made a theatrical exit.

“That cat is a menace!” Timothy made a production of checking his leg, but Magdalene was no longer interested. Her mental to-do list was a mile long, and she had business to attend to.

“Timothy, are you here to complain about my cat?”

“Your cat? You hate cats!” His face arranged itself into a rather comical expression, eyes bulging and mouth open, as his fingers came away with no blood from his ankle. Shame. Sir Willoughby must have intended to scare rather than maim.

“Timothy...” She sighed, her thoughts being pulled in twenty different directions by the enormity of the day and by what had already transpired earlier.

“Magdalene...” He evidently wanted to argue, but instead he got closer, and to her surprise—and damn, why did those just keep on coming?—ran his thumb over her cheek. She recoiled, and the hurt on his face almost made her regret it. Almost.

Shaking her head, she scowled at him.

“I'm sorry, I just...” His voice sounded adequately apologetic, and she softened her own stance just a little. “You just... You had a spark in your eyes when you opened the door. I missed seeing it. Seeing you like this.”

Oh, that must have been the expression she'd greeted him with, and he perhaps thought she was happy to see him instead of still reliving her conversation with her mother. She sighed, but he was on a roll, her input obviously not necessary. “I miss you. I can't help it. I miss the girl who was bathed in sunshine that you were when we were married—”

They'd been together for ten years, and it dawned on Magdalene how little he understood her. Oh, he knew her moods and quirks, her needs and idiosyncrasies. But he didn't understand her at her core. And despite only

knowing her for mere months, Sam did. And of all the wonders that were taking place before her today, that was the biggest one. And by far, the brightest.

“Timothy, I have no idea what in the world you’re even talking about. I was never a sunshine kind of person.”

“You were to me!” He actually stomped his Santoni-shod foot, and she wanted to cringe. Honestly, he was a spoiled boy when she’d met him, and he was still that same spoiled boy decades later, no matter how expensive his shoes were now.

As if echoing her thoughts, he followed the direction of her gaze and smiled in self-deprecation. Well, he was pampered; he wasn’t an idiot.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m acting like a total fool. I apologize for all of it, and it’s a very important day for you. Half of Boston is here already, and I imagine more will join. I wasn’t going to say anything, but when you had that expression on your face earlier, I just... The memories of you are so sharp, Magdalene, they’re slicing at my skin.”

He actually rubbed at his neck, and she bit her lip to try to avoid laughing in his face. He must have read some poetry. Or a self-help manual for ditched, cheating ex-husbands. Such fervor. It was comical, really. So instead of laughing, she did what she always resorted to when he was being a total drama king.

She sidestepped him and reached for the nape of his neck, tugging on the collar of his shirt and the small piece of white material that was clearly bothering him, since he’d been scratching there ever since he’d come in.

“It’s just the tag, Timothy. Slicing at your skin. No need for all this melodrama.”

He looked at her with the shocked expression of someone not used to being mocked, his mouth agape once more. But after a few seconds, he just grinned and, in that smile, Magdalene again recognized the man she’d chosen to marry. Young and carefree, and yes, spoiled and arrogant, but also kind and funny and a little insecure.

Perhaps it was that insecurity that had ultimately done them in, since she’d dived into her own life, and he never quite could accept not being central to her existence.

Yet there was peace in the sadness. As she stepped to the window overlooking the busy green expanse of the quad, Magdalene felt vulnerable and too damn melancholy, only to have her breath catch when she saw Sam

stride along in the distance right behind Lily and Amanda as they were frolicking through the grass. Magdalene bit her lip. The dark, tight-fitting pant suit hugged all those sharp and lean angles and muscles and made her mouth water.

“Where *are* you looking for love, Magdalene?”

What an odd question. And his tone was grave, so unlike anything she had heard from him lately. She’d barely managed to stop herself from jumping a foot in the air, but only through sheer force of will was she able to deny Timothy the satisfaction of seeing her startled. But he wasn’t angry. Neither did he appear to be trying to trap her into a confession. As she looked at his profile, chiseled and so well-known to her, every line, every expression familiar, she recognized a sadness that was reflected within her own heart that lived in those features now.

They stood in silence for a moment. And when Sam turned and the early morning sun caught her face, turning her golden, Magdalene did gasp. Timothy turned to face her and laid a hand on her wrist, his smile wobbly, lips trembling with the concealed emotion of the finality of understanding. The finality of complete and absolute loss.

“Or perhaps you have finally found it?”

She didn’t answer, but when she silently stepped into his waiting arms, his hug was warm and safe and yes, familiar. And for once, he did not ask anything of her. For once, there was an understanding between them. And just this once, they were on the same page, even if he was currently bleeding with the red of disappointment and heartbreak.

SHE CHOSE NOT to take his arm as they made their way to the ad hoc stage in front of the school. She didn’t sit either. Most of the trustees, who were huddled at the far end of the stage, returned the nod she directed at them. Even Alden bowed his head. *Astonishing.*

A glance in front of herself, at the sea of avaricious eyes, and she was ready. Her earlier musings about hornets returned as the volume of chatter increased just before she finally had enough. Her grip on the bell’s handle was too tight, her knuckles white, and she made a concentrated effort to relax her fingers before she rang it three times, quieting the crowd somewhat.

Orla, surrounded by her cohorts of old and young Dragonettes, still chattered away, the disrespect clear in everything from the continued noise to how most of them stood either with their backs to her or sideways, facing Orla, demonstratively reverential to their leader.

Magdalene wanted to laugh out loud. Such small, such ridiculous squabbles, all the while choosing to completely ignore the bigger picture of the school going up in proverbial flames in front of their own eyes. It was telling that misinformation and propaganda were poison so easily spread. All you needed was to identify a common enemy, and people's hearts would be susceptible to anything.

Well, since I am your common enemy, ladies, let's get all that hatred flowing freely then...

Her smile razor-thin and infused with all the venom she could muster, she began.

“Good morning and welcome to Three Dragons, distinguished guests. I'm surprised but gratified to find so many of you here today. I find it extraordinary that the Academy is still so clearly near and dear to your hearts, years after attending it.”

She deliberately kept her voice on the quieter side, lowering it still, as it forced those in attendance to remain entirely silent to hear her. The majority of the Dragonettes wore confused expressions, undoubtedly trying to figure out whether they should be offended by the pointed jab at both their age and their unusual numerous presence.

A glance at Orla's face showed her it was a distinctive shade of puce now, which was very gratifying, but Magdalene was aiming for purple. She so adored pushing all those moth-balled buttons. Magdalene bit the inside of her cheek to hide her fiendish pleasure and continued.

“Still, I appreciate the unwavering support the school has received this summer. Because no matter our differences, one thing was always clear to me, even before I signed on to become Headmistress of Three Dragons. Under no circumstances could I let this school down. Too many people have cared about it too much for the past two centuries of hard work, to have its existence squandered on empty promises and elitist pretenses. I was called in to save the school, and I was given the requisite authority to do so by the trustees.”

The rustling behind her could only be Alden, since that was as big of a barefaced lie as she could have dropped on him. But since no one could

contradict her in public and denounce her attempts at rewriting recent history—with the trustees basically imploring her to close the school and save whatever money could be saved—she cast her eyes over the six hundred or so souls now glued to her every word.

“When I took over the school, I found it in a crisis that, if not stopped and reversed, meant Dragons would have had to have closed its doors within twelve months.” The collective gasp was so resounding and perfectly synchronized, Magdalene felt in total control, the crowd now eating out of the palm of her hand.

A lone cry of “*lies!*” sounded from behind Sam and Joanne, and Magdalene licked her lips to hide her smirk. She had gotten her wish. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Orla Fenway, now the color of a plum, had finally reached the end of her rope.

Nonetheless, Magdalene was entirely unimpressed and unperturbed by the outburst. In fact, she didn’t even turn her head in the direction of the shout, instead proceeding once silence reigned again.

“This is fact.”

Three words, and a pin could be heard dropping. Yes, now they were all facing her, breaths bated, every set of eyes glued to her. Yes, now Orla Fenway, Stanton Alden, and the rest of these useless people did not matter. She had them, their attention. And for all their animosity, she had their respect. It was reflected in the hundreds of eyes watching her every move.

Magdalene counted to ten in her head, giving the hungry horde time to digest the information and to crave more. Her timing was impeccable when she adjusted the microphone, and those seated in the front rows tracked the movement of her hand like hyenas following her lion.

“It is also a fact that the previous administration had a very tough time running the school under some of the most difficult conditions. I would like to express my gratitude that they did so to the best of their ability.” Sarcasm may be the fool’s refuge, but Magdalene was past caring.

And the way Orla was spitting fire, raging to everyone around her who would listen in that stage whisper of hers that was louder than her actual voice, Magdalene knew it really didn’t matter what she said. She could have announced that Dragons had obtained funding for the next thousand years, and Orla Fenway would have picked up a pitchfork and gone after her, braying at her acolytes to follow.

Burn the witch, indeed.

Magdalene closed her eyes for a second, trying to dislodge the images her brain was conjuring. Was it not enough for actual demons to be haunting her? And yet this hit decidedly different than the hunting done by the wolf. This felt immediate, the sea of people screaming for her to be burned at the stake. So did her own psyche have to supply her with visions of being set on fire?

Brains were wonderful, awful things sometimes, and so were people. Especially zealots, no matter which side of the issue they were on. They were never helpful. They just wanted to see the world burn.

She swallowed hard, desperate now to dislodge the lump in her throat she herself had placed there. When she spoke, her voice was hoarse.

“Moving forward, I would like to inform you all about some of the changes that will be taking place at Dragons. Changes that I believe will save the school, and not only improve its situation, but guarantee its legacy as well as its survival.”

When she placed her hand palm down on the podium, the signal was immediately understood by those involved in her little subterfuge. A few seconds later, there was some movement to the side, and a beautiful, distinguished woman in a black suit stepped towards the front of the crowd.

“The trustees had a list of conditions for my appointment. Some of them were presented to the faculty at the beginning of summer and subsequently sent to all the families and Old Dragonettes via the school newsletter. Chief among those conditions was the return of the school to its spiritual roots.”

With the earlier visual still stark in her mind’s eye, Magdalene did what she could to divest herself of it. So instead she used it. Inoculation was the best way of emancipation.

“As you all know, after years of burnings, persecutions, witch hunts and other atrocities perpetrated by the Puritans here in Massachusetts, some of them decided that controlling adult women was so much more difficult than molding the docile minds of young girls. Hence, Three Dragons Academy for Girls was founded for this illustrious purpose.”

And now the collective gasp was earsplitting, the bewilderment clear on everyone’s faces. Some of the trustees looked like they were shell-shocked because Magdalene was beyond irreverent. And yet, there wasn’t much they could say. She was honoring the true roots of Dragons, but she was also insulting pretty much every one of the nine people behind her, who had demanded and heralded the return of the old days. The old days which Magdalene was now very cavalierly exposing for what they truly were. But

she wasn't done. As she raised her hand, the crowd stopped breathing again.

"However, I have instructed the renovation managers to prioritize the restoration of the chapel, per instructions from the Board. Moreover, I have invited a pastor to live on the island and conduct services at Dragons Chapel. Please allow me to introduce the Honorable Reverend Emily Lavallo. Reverend Lavallo is one of the first women pastors serving in New England, and we are honored that she has agreed to join our school."

She pressed her lips together, mindful of the lipstick, and a stray thought about how Sam would feel about the good Reverend crossed her mind. Magdalene knew religion was a sore spot for her for so many reasons, and she had chosen Emily Lavallo in no small part to somehow wipe away Sam's lifelong impression of clergy. Because Reverend Lavallo was, simply put, quite something.

"Reverend Lavallo holds a Ph.D. in Gender Studies as well as her title as a clergywoman and, in addition to being our new chaplain, will conduct an elective class in her area of expertise and other related studies pertaining to Religion and Inclusivity, Religion and Feminism, as well as Religion and History of Women's Rights. Please welcome Reverend Lavallo and her wife to Three Dragons."

As the quad erupted in cheers and jeers and Emily Lavallo took a slight bow, Magdalene pursed her lips and stilled herself. Behind her, the silence was deafening. There would be hell to pay. She could already envision Joel and his broken, ugly nose seething.

"Now, let's move on to some logistical decisions I had to make in regard to the functionality of the school. It was brought to my attention that my original plan to dissolve the three Houses would result in total revolt against my leadership. I see that some of you have made quite a trek to Dragons for today's assembly, I'm sure to give me a piece of your mind if I were to even attempt such a sacrilege."

She infused her smile with as much fake levity as possible and made it all venom this time around. She did not fear these people. And by god, they would fear *her* by the time it was all over.

The crowd returned to being wary. After all, this was the issue that had galvanized so many of them to gather here today. And this time, she could sense the restless vigilance from the Board behind her as well. The students fidgeted, the faculty whispered, and the trustees, despite being prominently on display, did both.

Magdalene was tempted to break character and do a little jig. That is, if she had a character to break and knew what a jig was or which steps it entailed. Plus, her shoes would likely not facilitate such an exertion. Still, it felt amazing pissing off absolutely every single one of these complete and utter jackasses. She felt like buffing her nails on her sleeve, very much like Candace.

“Before moving forward, I’d like to inform you I have not reached this decision lightly. I have looked at ten years’ worth of disciplinary actions taken for conflicts resulting from what should have been mundane interactions between members of different Houses. They range from petty squabbles to outright assault and battery. I understand the need, the deep-seated desire to belong to something.”

She tried exceedingly hard not to look at Sam, to not show how much she understood her lover. How much she sympathized. In the end, Magdalene stole a very quick glance, their eyes meeting for a heartbeat before she continued, wrapped in the warmth of that gaze.

“But what everyone attending Dragons should wish to belong to is *Dragons*. Nothing and no one else. It’s not Amber versus Sky Blue. It’s not Sky Blue versus Viridescent. It’s Dragons against the world. Hence, I am canceling any and all inter-House competitions. But since some traditions are meant to endure, the Houses are staying.”

Magdalene had anticipated the reaction that was bubbling over just waiting for her to finish her speech, shouts already filtering in from the more remote parts of the crowd. And so without stopping, she lifted a hand, effectively putting an end to all interference.

“From now on, the Academy will compete against schools throughout New England. I have already arranged for our teams to be enrolled in the regional soccer, lacrosse, and chess tournaments, as well as academic and choir competitions.”

This time, the collective gasp sounded more like a moan of pleasure, an exhalation of angst released into the clear blue sky. Magdalene heard a distinct sigh of relief from behind her, signifying that even the trustees were appeased, as one of the massive hurdles that absolutely everyone had imposed was overcome with minimal bloodletting.

With the ambient noise growing in decibels, Magdalene extended a hand, and silence reigned once more. In the distance, she caught Sam smiling, the joyful, satisfied smile of someone whose trust had been rewarded and who

was extremely proud of the person on center stage. Warmth spread through her chest, and somehow the wound at her sternum seemed even smaller, muscles and skin brand new, covering the old sinew. She could get used to the feeling of being supported, of being made whole, solely by being believed in, by being trusted.

But it was time to get back to business.

“Now, perhaps in your momentary elation, many of you may not ask yourselves the most important question. How is Dragons, which is already so deep in the red that it’s almost extinct, going to pay to keep its doors open?”

Before she lowered her eyes away from Sam, she saw Joanne clutching at her elbow in obvious distress, but Magdalene drew out the pause regardless, remaining silent, instead flicking through her notes and ratcheting up the tension.

“Now, since I am envisioning a growing number of out-of-state and regional trips for our sports and academic teams, the money does have to come from someplace. Unfortunately, we will be cutting several programs. You will all receive emails with further information on what exactly will no longer be offered. I can tell you that cutting some foreign languages and a selection of art-related studies will save the school about 10% of the total funding set aside for those faculty and curricula. That is obviously a small but not insignificant amount of savings.”

Some subdued murmurs were her only answer, and she chose to ignore those and forged on.

“The rest of the funding to put the school back into the black and sustain it for the next fifty years will come from Three Dragons Academy leasing the abandoned Astronomy Tower on Viridescent Cliff and the ground it stands on to the township, which has already approved the blueprints to turn the building into a state-of-the-art hotel.”

Shouts, boos, and cheers all rang together. Magdalene glanced at Sam once again. Now all her lover’s incessant questions about the commotion on the cliff farthest from the school were about to be answered. It also explained why the Mayor and some of the council members were here, alongside the town’s most prominent business people.

Magdalene’s heart was beating so fast, the enthusiasm overtaking her, she feared it would crush its way out of her newly healing chest. On her wrist the Vacheron once again felt like a shackle, but she knew she was doing the right thing. If only because the trustees’ whispers were now shouts of shock and

dissatisfaction, and because Orla's color was closer to that of a five-day bruise, a green and pus tinge of yellow on top of her already well set-in shade of purple.

For two centuries, the school had stood aloof and separate from the township—they never mingled, with the settlement's population slowly outgrowing its smaller-sized part of the island. But having nowhere else to expand, the town's economy was stifled by the lack of opportunities, and the school had resolutely refused to sell any of its vast and mostly vacant holdings.

The separation may have started out as casual, but it also kept the students and the faculty isolated and safe on the cliffs. Now that was about to change. Since the school's occupants never went to the town, the town was about to come to the school. The mountain to the proverbial Mohammed.

With the cacophony rising around her, Magdalene reached out to ring the small bell again, but this time, silence took longer to settle over the crowd. Once it had descended to her satisfaction, she proceeded.

“As I mentioned, all of you will be receiving a very detailed breakdown of all the logistics, financial and educational changes that shall occur at Dragons in the coming year. But I can assure you that none of these decisions have been made lightly. I am fully aware that some things at Dragons are sacred, hence those things will endure. Others, while still cherished and respected for centuries, have to be sacrificed so that Dragons itself can live on. With this being said, I assure you that there will be a school here next year and for many years to come, which is more than anyone could have hoped for two months ago.”

Magdalene gathered her papers. The crowd was no longer under any semblance of control, regular conversations and yelling, arguing and cheers mixing into a cacophony that was beginning to give her a headache. She rubbed her temple. It was time to depart. No doubt the nine trustees behind her would demand she make herself available to them immediately, and she needed to catch her breath first.

She turned off the microphone and made to leave the podium when a loud, impatient voice rang out from the far end of the quad. The sound made her grit her teeth.

“What about the scholarships? What about the students?”

Orla Fenway. That tactless piece of... just couldn't keep her mouth shut without making everything so much more difficult than it needed to be.

Lily, Amanda, Suzie, Tally... All the scholarship girls. Their faces were tense, some were clearly tearing up. All because a righteous ass was using them as a cudgel to beat the new headmistress over the head and to score cheap points with the sympathetic crowd.

She was othering them so blatantly. The road to hell was paved with the good intentions of people like Orla Fenway. Or in this case, the no-so-good ones. In the distance, she noticed Sam shaking Joanne's restraining hand off her elbow, clearly ready to intervene.

Magdalene proceeded to press the microphone's 'on' button yet again and utilized her most disinterested tone.

"What about Dragons' students, Professor Fenway?" She paused, but only for a second. There was no need to milk this. People all around understood her intent loud and clear, even if Fenway chose to be ignorant and hateful.

"Three Dragons is a private school for young women. All young women who want to study here. With the additional funding from the agreement regarding the Astronomy Tower, the school will not be cutting scholarships for any and all who need them. Moreover, Dragons will be expanding those scholarships to better reflect the actual ethnic, racial, and religious makeup of the state, which is something the school does not achieve right now. In centuries past, Dragons was always a trailblazing institution when it came to diversity and inclusion. Long may it continue."

In the distance, she could see Sam's shoulders relax. There were seventeen freckles on the right one and twenty-three on the left. Magdalene blinked away her thoughts and leaned into the microphone once more.

"And, for the record, Professor Fenway, even if there would not have been enough funds raised, I'd have paid for the ten students currently on scholarships at Dragons myself. Being the Headmistress makes me part of the school, hence my sponsorship would not have been against the charter. However, surely you'd agree that having the Astronomy Tower contract in place makes the scholarships much more sustainable than relying on the Headmistress' personal fortune. Now, dear guests, enjoy the refreshments!"

She stood for a second longer than necessary, the sun suddenly emerging from the clouds behind her, its warmth on her back, and the wind sweeping her hair, and looked into the crowd at nobody in particular.

This was but one battle, and behind her, the war was truly brewing. But for just one moment, she allowed herself to taste victory as Fenway turned

away and marched off, surrounded by a gaggle of her supporters. As she passed by Sam and Joanne, neither of them looked at her. The Vacheron on Magdalene's wrist felt lighter.

OF HOWLING CROWDS & UNBRIDLED COURAGE

*I*t felt a little like crawling through hell as it was breaking loose around her. Magdalene tried not to look back, understanding what Orpheus must have endured, because it seemed almost impossible to walk this gauntlet and not turn to see who else was hurling either insults or praises her way.

They shouted, yet parted like the sea before her. Even Orla had made herself scarce. Magdalene had no illusions she would face the hag soon enough. In fact, if she were a betting woman, she'd put some serious money on seeing her predecessor in her office in about the time it took Magdalene to reach it herself. Where she was sure to get into a serious shouting match with the trustees, whose seething presence she could feel behind her as she made her way across the quad and towards the towering building of the school.

As she crossed the threshold, she broke her stride and finally turned around. But her gaze lifted beyond the buzzing crowd and the angry men. There'd be enough time for that. No, her eyes drifted towards one sight that could center her. As Lily and Amanda were hugging it out and kissing in the middle of the quad, the Dragons watched from a distance, benevolent and silent, overlooking the human spectacle unfolding in front of them.

The children, as much as the cliffs, reminded her of what was important as she nodded to the fast-approaching trustees, signaling for them to follow.

She took the stairs up to the third floor and had to smile. They were pursuing her like greyhounds during a hunt. There was no way they wouldn't have been hot on her heels. Timothy's smirk told her he'd realized that her pretending to invite them gave her at least some semblance of control over a situation that was about to turn volatile. She had lit all the fuses, and now

she'd reap the detonation.

The door to her office barely opened, Joel Tullinger unceremoniously pushed in, not waiting for her to enter first. Well, so much for chivalry. For the hundredth time, she wanted to kiss Sam for breaking this pompous jackass's nose.

Timothy let her pass with a slight bow and she made a production of walking in and thanking him with a wink and head tilt.

Magdalene took a look around the crowded room, mentally counting. She'd seen Alden ambling towards the school at a slower pace, so she guessed he'd join them in his own time. The door opened once again, and Orla Fenway stepped in, just as Magdalene had predicted. The witch would not miss the fireworks, since she had to see to the hornets who were out for blood after Magdalene had kicked the nest. Still, something was missing. Someone. Within seconds, a loud meow of profound disgruntlement and offense could be heard even before Willoughby—with a speed quite uncharacteristic of his majestic broad self—ran inside. Hissing at everyone to make way, he first jumped onto her desk, then bestowed a rather powerful headbutt on her side before finally slowing down.

Magdalene ignored the dumbfounded stares from the assembled trustees and gave him a quick scratch before picking him up and settling him down on his windowsill pillow. Close enough that he'd feel part of the proceedings. And well, close enough that she'd feel her furry ally had her back.

She almost shook her head. This damn island got her to consider a mangy cat an ally. Willoughby narrowed his eyes as if he guessed where her thoughts had gone, and she reached into the little bag on her desk and fed him a treat. He relaxed and took it from her fingers, apology accepted.

When she turned back to face the room, the atmosphere was even more poisonous than before. Seemed like making them wait while she tended to the cat had only added insult to injury.

Mission accomplished then.

Because they would wait until she was good and ready to have this foolish argument. It was time to settle something once and for all. And Joel Tullinger, Augustus Rolffe, and the rest of this pathetic lot would back the hell off and know their place once she was done.

Magdalene sat down behind her desk and placed her hands palms down on the only piece of paperwork laid out on the expanse of the centuries old oak. Her contract.

“Well, I was going to say ‘make yourself at home,’ Joel, but you certainly seem to have done so already.”

As Joel’s shouts about her unprofessionalism and irresponsible behavior in regard to her duties to the school and the trustees rang loud and obnoxious in the small space, she could see Timothy furrow his brow and stand taller, clearly determined to defend her. Just as she got close to reaching the end of her tether, the door opened yet again and Alden walked in. Bile rose in Magdalene’s throat. Sam held his arm and his hand was on hers as he maneuvered them through the crowded office, closer to where Joel was still all spittle and rage.

Sam’s eyes flashed with something Magdalene could not decipher, but Joel’s shouts demanded her attention. She almost touched her sternum, throbbing with anxiety at Sam’s appearance, but lowered her hand again, drawing strength from the sun-warmed paper under her fingertips.

“... how could you have undergone the number of changes that you did without so much as consulting the Board, Ms. Nox? This is inconceivable and irresponsible at best, and illegal at worst!” Joel, who didn’t seem to take note of the new arrivals or of Magdalene’s silence, just raged on. He looked like he was about to launch into another tirade when Magdalene cut him off.

“I do not need to consult with the Board on such matters, Mr. Tullinger.” She thought she could actually see foam forming around his mouth at her measured reply.

“How in the hell...”

“Joel—” To her surprise, the interruption originated from the hoarse voice she had grown to know well. The same voice that had told her that ‘perverts like her’ had no place at Dragons. Stanton Alden. Was he rebuking Joel? She wasn’t certain, but one word from him, and silence reigned.

Nonetheless, Magdalene wasn’t about to let Alden stand in front of her, if that even was what he was doing. She turned the paper under her palms text up, displaying the Dragons’ crest on the document empowering her as Headmistress along with a nice set of signatures framing her own.

“Before you expose yourself as ignorant of my contract terms, Mr. Tullinger—a contract that you signed along with everyone else on the Board—let me inform you or remind you, whichever may be the case, that short of me selling off property, closing the school, or setting it all on fire, I, as the Headmistress, have the full power and authority to administer the school’s holdings as I see fit, as long as it is in accordance with the letter of the law.”

Magdalene could see George, who'd somehow materialized in the office, peek at her from behind Orla's bony shoulders, eyes strangely blank, but a scratchy cough from her left drew her attention.

Augustus Rolffe, one of the oldest trustees, whom Magdalene had never heard open his mouth, shook his head and tutted, giving her a smile that could only be described as patronizing, his curled mustache both pompous and comical.

"The letter of the contract may have been respected, Ms. Nox. But not the spirit. This school belongs to the trustees—"

Well, Alden, Joel, now Rolffe... Why any of them believed they could continue to disrespect her and her professional achievements without repercussions was anyone's guess. But if Magdalene were to venture one, it would be because they were men who were rarely checked by women—and almost never by a woman demanding to be given what was hers.

"It's Headmistress or Doctor Nox. I hold two Doctorates, one in English Literature and one in Education from Boston College and Harvard, respectively, Mr. Rolffe. I am not entirely certain when it became fashionable for you and others on the Board to forget that and refuse to give me the respect that is due to me."

Joel sputtered, Rolffe's eyes bugged, and his voice rose, losing its rustiness, now sounding like a howl.

Wolves...

Magdalene lowered her face for a second, her fingers gripping the edge of the desk, seeking purchase, as panic stretched its tendrils into her lungs, shutting them down, suffocating her. She tried to tune out the louder noises and focus on the silence. Timothy—still standing to her right, ready to come to her aid at any moment—and Alden, who continued to hold Sam's hand on his forearm, were the ones she took some solace from. Even if the latter was an odd choice, him not jumping into the fray as yet surely was a good sign?

As Joel bristled, George stepped out from behind Orla, her hands balled, but it was Willoughby who broke the perilous detente by getting up from his pillow and hissing at Joel. Her ginger knight.

Before the cat—or George for that matter—could launch and rip Tullinger's face off, help came from the one source Magdalene desperately wished for and had just as desperately tried not to hope for.

"And when will you acknowledge that you placed Headmistress Nox in an impossible situation, ready to throw her under the bus for any and all

decisions that she would make, without so much as blinking an eye?”

Sam’s voice was matter-of-fact, conversational even, but in the chaos of the office, it commanded absolutely everyone to turn to her.

“Excuse me, young lady?” Rolffe’s bushy eyebrows climbed all the way up his massive forehead.

The heaviness around her chest lifted, the roots of the anticipated panic attack falling away, allowing her not just to breathe but to also want to laugh out loud. Of all the wrong things to say, referring to Sam, whose nostrils were already flaring, ‘young lady’ was perhaps the worst mistake possible. Indeed, the Fourth Dragon—as Sam fittingly had been dubbed by students and faculty alike for her staunch defense of the school and her unquestioning loyalty—zeroed in on Rolffe as if he were a bug to be squashed, and the older man took a startled step back from the blazing gray eyes. Magdalene wanted to fan herself.

Mercy...

“No, I will not excuse you, Mr. Rolffe. It’s Professor or Doctor Threadneedle. I have also earned a Ph.D. in Education and I wish I could say that my title is beside the point, but it isn’t. The lack of respect, the utter and astonishing lack of regard that has been accorded to the women on faculty at Dragons by the Board of Trustees for years is beyond the pale.”

There was no use in even attempting a poker face, and why would she when Sam was, for all intents and purposes, her avenging angel incarnate? Magdalene observed the spectacle unfolding as it suffused her with joy. When Sam’s gaze met hers, she actually bit her lip. The gray eyes widened a fraction before the wide mouth pursed as if trying to hold back whatever reaction Magdalene had elicited before turning to Joel and Rolffe.

“Calling us by anything other than our titles is one thing, but to place every speck of blame for your incompetence and irresponsibility—which has driven the school into the ground and wrecked the endowment—on our shoulders is unconscionable.”

As Sam set her jaw, she seemed to shake whatever leash had been holding her back, and Magdalene wanted to applaud. Pride, along with not an inconsiderable amount of lust, swelled in her chest... Well, Magdalene chose to think of it in those terms, even as she crossed her legs.

“Mr. Tullinger, in his speech two months ago, implied that the decisions made by Headmistress Fenway were responsible for bankrupting the endowment, but who manages it? Who is responsible for the day-to-day

investments, for the actual administration of those funds? The school requests the money according to the budget approved by the Board. Why was the school not informed that the investments made these past years have been ruinous to the endowment?”

A math teacher talking numbers and budgets would never not be attractive. Magdalene worried the inside of her mouth to refrain from smirking as Sam went on.

“Why have the trustees continued to approve further budgets they knew full-well would drive the school deeper into red? And then, when the hammer fell, why was Headmistress Fenway blamed for it all? You gave seemingly full authority to Headmistress Nox, and then proceeded to scold her like a child—in front of her own employees no less—for doing exactly what you all entrusted her to do!”

The silence that ensued was deafening. Even Willoughby was no longer hissing, sitting on his haunches, tail wrapped around his legs, watching Sam with his head turned slightly to the side. The trustees were clearly astonished by the audacity, one and all, and George had her mouth open in stupefaction.

Magdalene felt lightheaded, she felt lifted, protected, something that she had never experienced before. She wanted to cheer. Pump her fist in the air. She wanted to take Sam on this very desk, witnesses be damned, because what had just taken place was so unprecedented in her life, so truly special.

But before Magdalene could do anything, the one person who had yet to say a word or make any kind of gesture suddenly took center stage.

With a slow, showy clap, Orla stepped around Sam, turned to face the room, her back now to Magdalene, and continued to applaud. After an awkward moment, Alden joined in, then Timothy, eliciting a gasp from Sam. Only Joel and Rolffe, still fuming, did not join in the ovation. And Magdalene would be damned if she'd follow Orla Fenway into anything, much less into what was sure to be a trap of some kind.

She caught the disappointment in Sam's eyes, but decided that glaring at Orla was good enough to show her lover what she truly thought about this particular actor's gambit.

Clearly oblivious to Magdalene's distrust, Orla preened as all eyes were on her. Even her voice took on the shrill quality of someone positively manic under all that attention.

“From the mouths of babes, then.” Orla gave Sam a rather condescending smile. “Professor Threadneedle made a major point. But in her white knight

standup act, she also overlooked the massive turmoil that the school will be thrown into due to the unilateral decisions announced by Headmistress Nox today.”

Sam sucked in her lip and squared her shoulders, and Magdalene saw the hurt in her eyes and wanted to allay it. Hadn't Sam witnessed enough to know not to trust Orla's so-called good intentions yet? The road to hell was now fully paved with them, right down to and way past the entrance. But seeing Sam being mocked by her own mentor, whom she still cherished, pulled at Magdalene's already battered heart.

Well, slapping back Orla Fenway was one of her favorite pastimes, after all, and so Magdalene sighed and took a deft swipe at Orla in an attempt to also end the ghastly display of selfishness and theatrics from the majority of the trustees.

“While I can theoretically be criticized by the board, since that is their oversight role, I will not be berated for my decisions—which, as has already been established, I am not obliged to have pre-approved nor do I have to consult with anyone—let alone a subordinate. Now, if we are finished here, I have a school to run.”

“I don't think we are even close to being finished!” Magdalene sighed as Joel clearly felt his previous tantrum had not been given proper attention. “Anyone who thinks that what you pulled today is not a stunt is delusional, and you, in turn, are delusional if you think I'll simply let it go.”

Magdalene visualized herself re-breaking his nose. “Stunt? Whatever could you be referring to...” She shrugged theatrically, knowing that her exaggerated nonchalance would only inflame Joel further, but that devilish side of hers just couldn't help itself.

“The lesbian cleric for one. The scholarships for two. Do you really think I don't see what you're trying to do here? A lesbian pastor? At a girls' school?”

As Magdalene lifted her head to tear Joel limb from limb, in the blink of an eye, Sam, fists balled, stepped up to him.

“Excuse me?”

Sam's stance and her voice, for once raised, ensured that the hush that fell over the room felt like it weighed a ton. Perhaps realizing the gravity of what he had alluded to, and in front of all these witnesses, Joel loudly snapped his mouth shut, the unpleasant sound of bone hitting bone jarring.

Magdalene could feel what was about to happen. It wasn't hard to guess,

and her heart swelled with both pride and concern for Sam.

“Did you just imply that a lesbian pastor would somehow be detrimental to the school? Did I hear that right?” Sam’s breathing was coming quicker, her chest heaving. Magdalene smiled and thought that she had never looked as beautiful as now, enraged, ready to smite anyone in her path.

Sam seemed totally oblivious to everyone else around her, so focused on the person drawing her ire, that famed temper untethered, the Dragon in full flight now, so much so that she didn’t even react to a hand on her forearm—Alden, clearly trying to restrain her. Magdalene allowed herself a smile. It was too late. The Fourth Dragon had shed her chains.

“You keep bringing up the scholarships as a burden and an expense and as somehow contravening the charter, but absolutely everyone in this room and the ten girls celebrating outside are fully aware that this is your way of trying to rid the school of LGBTQIA students. What in the world did *queer* people ever do to you, Joel? I mean, it’s not like you were even aware that a lesbian broke your nose years ago.”

And there it was. Her pulse racing, pride overrode concern in Magdalene’s heart.

Sam looked majestic as she kept grinding Joel into dirt. “Your father made me apologize back then, but just so you know, I didn’t mean a single word of that apology. Just like whatever it is you’re about to spout now, how this is not the reason for canceling the scholarships, will not be even remotely sincere. You’re a bigot, Joel Tullinger. There, these are some words I stand by wholeheartedly.”

A pin dropping would have caused an avalanche in the silence that descended. Sam’s breath was the only sound for a few long seconds. That and Magdalene’s heartbeat, loud and rhythmic in her own ears, the beats steady as a metronome. Yes, the very heart that was barely there, hanging by a thread in the middle of the hacked-out cavity, was suddenly the one reliable measure of the passage of time around her.

The moment felt surreal. The words, their cutting, jarring edges, slicing through the fabric of reality and carving it up, all of its ugliness and all of its truth exposed. But above all, it cut through Magdalene like a knife and revealed a sense of pride she had not felt in a long time, or perhaps ever.

Their eyes met again, warmth palpable between them, and the connection, like a red line—like that tie that kept the Light Princess anchored to her prince, from that ridiculous book that Sam loved so much—twisted and

wound around all the figures in this room, yet held steady, pulling them gently towards each other.

Sam Threadneedle. You amazing human...

Suddenly, everyone started speaking at once, and the cacophony of voices intruded on Magdalene's mind like a sledgehammer. But the light in Sam's eyes did not dim for one second, and Magdalene knew it was her turn now, to stand up, and to defend. So she clapped her hands to ensure everyone's attention was once again focused on her.

"I think this conversation, while pertinent, is also highly emotionally charged right now. Mr. Tullinger, I'm sure you see how your words can be construed as discriminatory, and if any student or faculty, including the newly hired Reverend Lavallo, would choose to proceed with a litigious follow-up, I'm sure they would have some recourse... And plenty of witnesses right in this room..."

Joel's hands had begun to tremble, but Magdalene waited a second longer, letting him sweat before speaking again.

"Professor Threadneedle has made some very relevant points just now, and while we all need calmer heads to prevail, how about we adjourn this ad hoc meeting and set up something official for next week? George?"

To her left, she felt more than saw her secretary nodding emphatically, obviously understanding her orders and taking charge, herding the occupants of the office out of the cramped room.

Joel went willingly enough. Magdalene was aware that she had put the fear of a lawsuit in him, which, for people like him, held more weight than the fear of God they so eagerly bludgeoned others with. Rolffe, however, stayed behind, evading George's endeavors, looking like he still wanted to argue. He puffed out his chest, resembling a toad more and more by the second, and just as he opened his mouth, a gravelly, hoarse voice interrupted him with the quiet command of someone used to being obeyed.

"Augustus, you heard Headmistress Nox. The time and place to discuss issues will be determined, and we shall all be informed in due course, I'm sure. Now, I wish you and your faculty a smooth beginning of the school year, Doctor Nox, and await the summons at your convenience."

Magdalene just looked on as Alden extended his hand and pointed to the door while Rolffe silently acquiesced. It was Sam, though, who stood with her back to Alden, whose expression made her chest squeeze a bit. There was surprise and a tiny flicker of gratitude—and dare she say affection?—in those

innocent, tired eyes.

And while Alden was a worry for another day, Orla Fenway and her brazen, insolent ways of never quite knowing when to quit were not a worry at all. As the former headmistress stepped closer to her, Magdalene turned away, scratching under Willoughby's chin, allowing her body language to speak volumes about her willingness to engage in whatever Orla was spoiling for.

Her ministrations to Sir Willoughby were quite fortuitous in that his loud purring seemed to signal to everyone that this meeting was adjourned once and for all and the Headmistress had far more important things to attend to. Such as providing her cat's big, round head with more scratches and pats.

The few remaining trustees departed with huffy proclamations that they would be talking to lawyers.

She heard the familiar gait take a few steps towards the door in the now empty office, and Magdalene knew she could not let Sam leave. Not without at least expressing a tiny sliver of how she really felt.

As her head was still bent to the purring tom, she gently murmured, "Thank you," and the steps stopped, Sam's breath coming out in a loud whoosh quite a bit closer than Magdalene had realized.

"I think if he could speak he'd say 'you're welcome, Headmistress.' Plus, just look at him, all blissed out under your caresses. He's clearly grateful. You're some kind of walking catnip."

Well, per usual, Sam did what she did best, deflect and be exceedingly adorable. Magdalene smirked. If she wanted to play it this way, so be it.

"I must be then, since I know of another kitten who also purrs under my fingertips." Magdalene finally turned to Sam, and they were just a few inches apart, their body heat igniting her blood. She felt like she was burning up inside. She was famished, ravenous. The things she wanted Sam to do to her... Magdalene must have let her face show her hunger, because Sam's gulp was audible, and her sudden quick glance around the office to make sure the door was shut and they were alone was quite telling.

"Oh, now she cares about closed doors!" Magdalene wanted to laugh, she wanted to grab Sam by the collar and tear that shirt apart. She forgot about the cat entirely and took a few steps towards Sam. "Now she cares that we're alone in the room. Not five minutes ago when she might as well have declared her devotion for me from the highest rooftop, as she beat an asshole at his game, came out like the superhero that she is, and did so in the hottest

possible manner, she did not seem to care one jot about us being alone...”

Sam stared, blinking, seemingly lost in whatever was happening around her, before her shoulders and entire stance relaxed. As she licked her lips, Magdalene’s eyelids fluttered at the gesture, and she traversed the final step separating them.

“Do you know how big of a turn on your dressing-down of the trustees was? How you putting Joel firmly in his place was one of the hottest things I’ve ever seen? Do you know what I want you to do to me right now?”

Sam shook her head, and still didn’t seem to fully comprehend whether Magdalene was angry or playful. But Magdalene wasn’t either of those things. Magdalene was turned on. She was so hot and so wet, she thought she might simply devour Sam whole right then and there.

The spoken words and the unspoken message had finally gotten through, because in front of Magdalene’s eyes, Sam squirmed and squeezed her thighs together and balled her fists at her sides.

Magdalene did not let the silence deter her. She moved even closer, their bodies flush now, and whispered directly into Sam’s ear, her lips just a breath away from Sam’s delicate skin.

“I want you to spread me on my desk and sit down in my chair and thrust your tongue into my pussy and eat me until I scream. And then, when I beg you to stop because I can’t take it anymore, I want you to pin my hands to the desk and thrust three fingers into me and fuck me ‘till I scream again because I have never been more turned on in my life than I am right now, Sam.”

Sam kept still, her entire body taut like a string, until she swayed closer to Magdalene’s mouth, radiating need.

“Nobody has ever risked everything for me, nobody has stood up for me to the people who literally control their fate, their employment, their life to a certain degree, and, knowing they might be throwing it all away, gave some assholes a piece of their mind. For me. And for the school. For the truth and for what’s right. You’re unbelievable, Sam. Do you know how wet you made me standing there saying all that?”

Sam shook her head again, and the movement finally brought her skin in contact with Magdalene’s. And then the animal that lived inside of Sam—the one that took charge and routinely devoured Magdalene, overpowering her senses, making her forget her name and her self—snapped the veneer of a leash. Sam turned her head further, taking Magdalene’s lips in a deep, voracious kiss.

The events of the day crashed down on her even as Sam's mouth took her apart. She realized that she'd never truly known the power of a kiss—not when just the merest touch of lips stopped reality, ended daylight, drawing her into an existence that should not be real and yet was the only palpable thing. The only thing she *could* feel. The only thing she *wanted* to feel.

Sam's kiss held an untamed force behind it, the anxiety, the madness, and the energy of the day running wild in Magdalene's veins as she poured it all into the rough connection of their mouths. Lips tugged, teeth bit, and tongues caressed in full abandon, and Magdalene knew she'd never been kissed like this. Like she was the entire universe, like there was nobody else alive for Sam.

And in that moment, she knew. *She knew* that no matter what happened with them, no matter what the next day brought and the one after that, Magdalene was forever branded, by this kiss alone, by every single one that had come before it. She'd never be able to move on. Not from Sam. Not from this...

As Sam licked into her mouth, she whimpered, and the sound awoke an answering moan in Sam. They both gentled their touch, their lips caressing, and it was like they were making love to each other, fully clothed in the middle of her office, the wet, soft licks and the gentle glide of tongues pure sex.

Sam's mouth left hers, and as Magdalene was about to protest, to tug her lover back to where she wanted her most, Sam had latched on to the spot on her neck that she hadn't even been aware was sensitive, and now her knees buckled and her mind shut itself off. She threw her head back, giving Sam better access, completely forgetting where they were.

Well, the universe being a sadistic bastard, in true fashion, honed in on exactly that moment to ruin their encounter as a quick knock on the door made both of them jump about a foot in the air, then away from each other so quickly, Sam almost stumbled. Her mouth was swollen and smudged in Magdalene's lipstick as she lifted an unsteady hand to wipe her face.

Magdalene reached deep within herself for a cool and detached expression, despite realizing her dress was a total mess, and that she must have highly visible marks on her neck.

She took a deep breath, ran her fingers through her hair, and dabbed at the corners of her mouth. After one last look at Sam, who managed to look both more or less presentable and quite obviously guilty as sin, Magdalene had no

choice but to call, “come,” towards the door.

Her lungs burned with the breath she was holding, but seeing George appear, face hidden, arms stacked high with papers and files, Magdalene was almost dizzy with relief.

George wouldn't notice, and even if she did, she was loyal to a fault, and would have her back. She was on Magdalene's side, no matter what, through years of trials and tribulations.

Nevertheless, as George dropped the handfuls of papers on the desk, any hope Magdalene might have held out that George would either not notice or not show disappeared as she turned pale and then, in the blink of an eye, beet red.

Her secretary opened her mouth, then seemed to reconsider and did not quite raise her eyes to either Sam or Magdalene. Her lover coming out was a momentous occasion, which took considerable bravery and Magdalene felt she must be a little brave too. Perhaps she had dragged this sapphic secret on for too long, and this was the perfect time to let George in on it.

Decision made, Magdalene took a couple of steps back towards Sam and reached for her hand. Now Sam was the one with her mouth wide open, clearly shocked by the overt display of affection.

“You're adorable. Don't worry about George, we can trust her. She's been with me for the last twenty years. She's by far the person who knows me best and knows all my darkest secrets.”

George stared, her shoulder drooping for a fraction of a second before she was back to her usual self, as she giggled and preened at the praise, just as Magdalene knew she would. There was something George loved above all other things: Secrets and being trusted with them. Especially if they were Magdalene's.

Her secretary leaned against the desk, her entire face alight now after being confided in.

“Oh yeah, Maggie and I have been through pretty much everything together, haven't we, Maggie?”

Sam's fingers twitched in hers but she said nothing. Magdalene smiled and George exchanged a few words about the next day and meetings she would need to take before George left the paperwork on the pristine desk and departed with a long look and a wink directed at her. When the door closed, Sam tugged on the hand she was holding until Magdalene was fully in her arms again. Sam leaned in, but Magdalene's nerves remained too haywire to

give in. This had been such a close call. So instead, she gave her a little peck on the nose and stepped away.

“You make me a little crazy, Sam.”

“Just a little?” Sam’s pout was adorable, but Magdalene knew there were issues she should have addressed before consuming each other whole.

“Are you okay though, Sam? The coming out was impressive, but were you really ready for it?”

The pout turned into a shy smile.

“I didn’t think I was, until it was out in the open, so to speak. And then I realized that I have no idea why I’ve been hiding. Look at Lily, at Amanda, at the girls, they are all so brave, so true to who they are. They live their lives free of closet doors. Joel’s asinine accusations and his continuous attempts at trying to get rid of the LGBTQIA students might have spurred me on, but I think I’ve been ready for a long time. And I’m fine with this. It’s a little scary, but it’s also freeing in a way that I did not expect it to be.”

“I’m proud of you, darling and I’m sorry. I really am.” At Sam’s blank look, Magdalene elaborated. “Our reasons for maintaining this secret and for actually staying away from each other are still very much valid, Sam. Thank goodness that was just George, but what if it had been one of the trustees?”

“You mean Timothy?” Magdalene actually saw the green tinge those gray eyes for an instant.

“I wouldn’t have cared if it was Timothy. He’s the least of our worries and perhaps our only ally on that godforsaken board. Although I have to say Alden is completely taken with you, darling.”

Sam snorted.

“Yeah, right. I don’t know what’s up with him lately, but he’s been nice to me, which is something he’s never been all my life, so that’s weird.”

Magdalene sighed. Alden was a whole other minefield that she couldn’t begin to wade into now. The pesky reality of their situation, the sheer depressing nature of it, laying once again heavy on her shoulders.

“Give me some time. I’m looking into our options. The charter is fairly clear on the headmistress not being allowed to have any personal relationships with her staff.”

“That’s probably no longer valid under the current legislation, Magdalene.”

“Sam,” Magdalene whispered, and she knew her voice was pleading. Perhaps because she so seldomly asked for anything, Sam’s eyes turned sad,

but she shrugged and then nodded. “Sam, you’ve seen the vultures circling. They will use anything against me now. You’d think at least Orla would be pacified by my plans, but she seems to hate me even more than before for ‘desecrating’ her precious school and allowing the ‘dirty locals’ on the premises.”

Sam tugged on her hand again, and this time Magdalene allowed herself to be held. After all, it felt so safe, so good. Why should she deny herself the small pleasures? There would be precious few of them for the foreseeable future. She sighed and burrowed deeper into Sam’s warmth. Before soon, they were face to face once again, and a kiss was as natural as breathing, then another and another. They kissed and kissed again, soft, easy expressions of love that were more about future promises than current reality.

Their foreheads touching, she felt Sam nod again, the tacit agreement to anything and everything Magdalene had asked of her. She sighed then, the remnants of anxiety leaving her. Sam was with her. They would do this together.

OF OVERRATED SALVATION & CHALK HEARTS

A sense of profound and unwelcome déjà vu hit her when George rushed into her office, breathless. Magdalene bit back a sigh. This meant only one thing, and that was gossip. On any other occasion, she might have indulged. But today of all days, Magdalene was weary, the kind of tired that came from a long period of exhaustion. Her world had tilted, slightly out of alignment despite the row of victories she'd scored just a few hours ago.

The last time George had been this out of breath and excited, Alden and Sam were having their chat, which ended up taking Magdalene on the roller coaster ride of her lifetime, from the lowest of the low to the highest of highs. She was not in the mood for anything similar.

Magdalene stared at her desk and her own words of how she wanted to be eaten out on it came rushing back to her. Okay, so she was tired and wired. Well, that last part was entirely Sam's fault. For being irresistible, for being so... everything, really. Her protector, too damn self-sacrificing for her own good, standing up for lost causes left and right.

"Orla assaulted Sam!"

Magdalene's breath came out in a strangled half-howl. She was on her feet in an instant, only to have George hold on to her, bony fingers squeezing her shoulders too tight.

"She's fine. I stopped them. And maybe 'assaulted' wasn't the right word." George's smile was crooked and self-deprecating. Magdalene inhaled slowly. Of course. Exaggeration could have been her secretary's middle name.

"What happened, George?" Magdalene sat back down, her weariness suddenly settling over her like a blanket, smothering her. As if on cue,

Willoughby, with some distinct difficulty, made the not-so-distant jump from his windowsill to her desk and bumped her limp hand with his head, once, twice, until she lifted the appendage he was desirous of and laid it on his fur. Then, and only then, did he make a very graceful cat loaf, tucking his paws and tail under his bulk, and settle down.

Magdalene had to smile. To an untrained observer, he certainly made everything about himself. But she wasn't one of those, and she knew he was here, on harsh oak instead of the warm and cozy pillow, for her comfort. Because he realized she needed him. At the thought and the sensation of that sun-kissed fluff under her fingertips, she felt her shoulders relax.

"Orla was vicious, calling her names and spitting all sorts of accusations at her. And then she accused Sam of having the hots for you..." George's eyes shone with a strange kind of fervor and that spark as much as the choice of words grated on Magdalene's already exhausted psyche. George was apprised of the relationship, so why...? Magdalene laid a tired hand over her forehead and chased the annoyance away.

"And what did Sam do?" For a second, the notion that Sam might confirm flitted across her mind, but she shook it off. Sam knew better. George having an idea of what was going on was one thing, but Orla? Fenway would use it to crucify them.

"Nothing. She's not very good under pressure, I'm afraid." George gave a dismissive little wave before gathering some of the paperwork and making neat stacks out of it. "She just sort of took it."

Magdalene clenched her jaw. She didn't care about Fenway being a total bitch to her, but Sam was another matter altogether. With her tender heart and that unwavering loyalty towards the absolutely undeserving former headmistress, she must have been hurt. Visions of tearing Orla from limb to limb crossed her mind. Sadly, it probably wasn't what Sam would want. Magdalene shifted her focus back to George who was doing that thing where she stole glances at her, but tried not to look too closely. Knowing George, she was likely attempting to figure out Magdalene's next move.

If only she herself had any idea what that might be, aside from finding Sam and trying to allay some of that hurt...

Maybe kiss Sam...

But then running to find Sam had been Magdalene's impulse ever since she had first landed on this island. And so had kissing Sam. In fact, these days, kissing Sam was pretty much the only constant thing on Magdalene's

mind. Those full, sensual lips. She dreamt of them. She wanted to trace them, with her fingertips, with her tongue.

Magdalene actually tsked at herself as she got up and passed George, who was still hanging on her every word. Too bad Magdalene had none left. She was a lovesick fool who was beyond salvation at this point. And who needed salvation, really?

As Willoughby joined her down the long, dark corridor leading to the back entrance, Magdalene gave him a quick pat and whispered, “salvation is overrated,” to which he meowed something that sounded distinctly like, “you have lost what little was left of your mind,” as they made their way into the damp afternoon air.

SHE FOUND her mark easily enough, their similarities in places to seek comfort and solitude eerie. The Amber Cliff with its mossy green blanket and secluded shadows was the perfect spot.

Sam was close to the edge, doodling something on the naked face of the rock, and the precious sight of that messy bun, the flyaways no match for the ocean breeze and incoming storm, suddenly had that tilt that had Magdalene off balance starting to right itself. Such a simple vision. Sam, alone, calm, in her flannel shirt that should be outlawed in most states, for the things it did to the lesbian- and bi population.

Willoughby hurried towards Sam, now indulgent of her presence, bumping her side before sidestepping a more involved caress. But Magdalene stilled her steps, slowing down a touch, savoring the view and the anticipation of Sam’s nearness.

She thought back on her 46 years and on how she had always hurried everywhere, hungry for love, for attention, for success, and yet here it was in the shape of this woman. Magdalene’s smile came unbidden. The best of things were worth waiting for.

Sam was focused on her drawing, and not even Willoughby’s love-thump distracted her enough. Magdalene knew Sam would be aware of her presence. Willoughby was her harbinger after all. But she waited, too, and that was another lovely surprise. Sam gave Magdalene time.

The wind from the ocean blew stronger, getting under Magdalene’s

clothes and playing with the tails of the shawl she had wrapped around her, but it was Sam's shiver that attracted her attention, and she proceeded to pull off the garment.

"I didn't know you could draw."

She draped the fabric over Sam's shoulders, careful not to interrupt her seemingly complex creative pursuit. Even though to call it such might have been an exaggeration. Magdalene bit her lip to suppress a tease, but Sam's serious expression of profound concentration was too much to resist.

"Although I may have overstated whatever it is you're doing here, Sam." Magdalene laughed, unable to disguise the adoration or the joke.

"I was doodling." Sam's pout was indeed adorable as she burrowed into the shawl and warmed Magdalene's heart.

"Whatever you say, darling." Sam's features, so open, always honest, did something to Magdalene's chest, squeezing it painfully, and the corners of her smile wobbled.

"What happened?" Sam, perceptive as ever, must have caught the shadows of sadness on her face. She reached out and clasped Magdalene's wrist in her chalky hand, pulling her down to sit next to her, leaving white smears on her skin. Glancing at the marks, Sam let go of her, and Magdalene instantly missed the contact.

Still, she did not want to mention Orla, or the insults, or the sadness. Surely, a little distraction was the way to go. One look to their right where loud snoring could be heard, and Magdalene had found her desired misdirection.

"Can I answer that question with an amusing joke instead?"

"Okay." The drawn out word and Sam's furrowed brow told Magdalene that she was letting her get away with whatever she was up to for now.

"I found a mouse in my office today. Or, to be perfectly honest, Sir Willoughby found it."

Sam's voice trembled with concern. "Another dead critter? I thought this whole thing stopped after we talked to the cops."

Magdalene reached out and quickly tucked a lock of flyaway hair behind Sam's ear, her fingers lingering on the soft skin. "Yes, it did, and I got a bit of a jolt, too, when I saw this massive mouse just lying there. But it turned out that Sir Willoughby decided to bring me an homage? A gift? I don't know what he was thinking, because I believe this was single-handedly the very first mouse he has ever caught, and the poor baby didn't know what to

do with it, so he just left it on my desk. Then I came in and screeched, as you can imagine, and the mouse, probably playing possum all this time, jumped and attempted to run away.” Sam’s eyes widened and she bit her lip, clearly trying not to laugh at the poor tom.

“Willoughby ran after it, caught it again, and when he put it in his mouth, he was so grossed out, he proceeded to throw up all over my carpet, which is when the mouse took the opportunity to make itself scarce, leaving me with a puking cat *and* a dirty carpet.”

They exchanged incredulous looks, then stared at the feline in question, happily snoozing on his knoll, and simultaneously burst into laughter.

“I have no idea why the school ever thought that this particular cat would be a good mouser, Sam. I swear he was scared and grossed out and looking at me afterward like, ‘you monsters, you want me to do what with mice?’”

She tried to avoid a sad conversation, and yet she steered them both right into it. Magdalene absently rubbed her arms, trying to ward off the chill of the fast-approaching night. Sam observed her carefully, as if gauging when to intervene, when she’d need to catch her amidst the unpleasantness that was sure to follow. The safety of that net was unlike anything Magdalene had ever experienced. And it gave her the courage to verbalize her not-so-random ruminations.

“Still, for a moment there, before the mouse revived itself, the thought of the whole harassment issue hit me again. I got used to not looking over my shoulder these past several weeks, Sam. I mean, it’s not like I hadn’t expected something like what happened today. I think I managed to ruffle pretty much everyone’s feathers.”

“Not mine.” Sam’s desire to touch was so evident, so blatant, and thus her restraint was even more admirable. “And not Lily’s or Amanda’s or Suzie’s or any of the scholarship girls, either. In fact, you made them very happy.”

A gust of wind made her wrap her arms around herself and then when even that did nothing to calm her, Magdalene sighed.

“I wish things were different.” So many things, in fact.

“Why? You saved them.”

“Sam, I wish we lived in a world where you’d never need to use those terms, because they’re just plain wrong. I wish the girls would never have to doubt that they are welcome, that they belong, even if they can’t afford the tuition.”

Sam tilted her head. “You showed people today that, regardless of who

they are or whether their parents can or cannot afford ridiculous amounts of money for a place at Dragons, they still belong. I thought your answer was perfect. I know people were upset, but then I think there were so many other things that you managed to sneak in under the radar and spring on them, at least half the faculty and the trustees were pretty torn about what exactly they felt they needed to be pissed at you for.”

Sam seemed to draw insecurities out of Magdalene like poison from a wound, making words pour out of her that she hadn't known she was entertaining.

“I'm sorry I had to keep the girls guessing, though. I'm sorry I caused even one moment of their anguish. But I couldn't tip my hand. The possibility that I could be removed prematurely and then be of no use whatsoever to them or the school...”

Sam shook her head, effectively stopping Magdalene's verbal descent into self-flagellation.

“I also think that absolutely everybody understood. Including the girls. I mean, Lily pretty much told me how fairly you've been treating her and how she wasn't anxious about the outcome. But instead of listening, it seems every single adult here, myself included, has been trying to protect her and the other girls without considering that maybe they're fine, and we should all stop telling them that they're not.”

“Ah, overprotective Sam.” Magdalene gave Sam her best, sly smile, but Sam simply looked on, her face impassive as if she was reading an open book. When all was said and done, it was extremely unfair that Sam had this much power over her. That she had equal power over Sam somehow wasn't comforting. Magdalene wanted to pout and Magdalene Fucking Nox did not do that. Ever. Sam's quiet words pierced her petulance.

“Now tell me what's actually wrong. Because, while the justifiable distress that our sweet ginger mouser found himself in is kind of adorable, you're still troubled.”

“Am I this transparent?” *Yes, pouting.* She had no defenses here.

After a brief glance around, Sam extended a trembling hand and her impulse to touch finally won over. But she only squeezed Magdalene's wrist again, effectively wiping away the chalk marks she had left there minutes ago. If only more things were as easily erased. Magdalene watched the movements of Sam's fingers and gave in, letting out a sigh.

“George told me Orla threatened you earlier today. That she was cruel to

you, and I think I came here partly in hopes of finding you, but also to get away from the school, lest I run into Orla. I'm not sure I'd be able to hold back."

"Is there anything at this school that ever stays private? Are there really eyes and ears everywhere?"

"If there weren't, we'd be sitting much closer than we are now, Sam."

Sam nodded in acknowledgment. That angular face was tense, hurt and disappointment etched on it.

"Please don't get involved. What transpired is between her and me. I am convinced she won't report us, whatever she thinks she knows, she has no evidence. She was way out of line, and I know her well enough to know that it was her anger speaking. She'll come around."

"But it made you upset, Sam. It made you sad. I can see it on your face." Magdalene reached out a hand and, despite her own earlier caution, her fingertips brushed Sam's cheek. Waiting. Waiting enhanced the spark that ignited immediately at the touch, even if it was gentle, and Magdalene put nothing but comfort in it. Sam closed her eyes for a long moment before licking her lips, and Magdalene's fingers trembled on her cheekbone. From spark to fire in a second. When Sam's eyes opened, the gray looked like embers would ignite those ashes any second now.

"Am I this transparent, Magdalene?" Sam's words were barely above a whisper as she echoed Magdalene's earlier question. For a moment, Magdalene was overwhelmed yet again with warmth and adoration for this woman. She wanted to lean and press their lips together, but at the last moment, she just booped Sam's nose and settled her hand back in her own lap.

Lust would derail them, as it always did, and she had more questions and more worries to allay. Hopefully, those were only her own, but she had to check, nonetheless.

"I also meant to ask you again if you are truly okay about what happened in my office earlier. You seemed so nonchalant about it then, both in how you came out and how you kind of just waved away my concern later on."

"Ha, and you say it's you who's transparent." Sam laughed, but Magdalene merely continued to observe her. "I don't know, honestly. When I was saying it, my main impetus was to put that little toad in his place. I wasn't afraid, and I'm still not. Hurray for the Supreme Court and their newly established workplace protections for LGBTQIA folk."

Sam turned away, breaking their connection, her eyes on the expanse of the ocean in front of her, fearless and relentless. Magdalene knew what it meant to feel small, to feel insignificant in the big scheme of things.

“Look, it wasn’t that I was in the closet because I was uncomfortable with who I am. I was afraid, sure, but I don’t think that was the main reason. And at a pretty conservative school, even with Orla’s rather loosened regime, it still made no sense for me to be out. It’s not as if I had anyone to kiss out here.” Magdalene tried to hide her smile, but when Sam faced her, eyes full of yearning, she instantly regretted them being in such a public place. How many regrets would they accumulate by the time they were free to love each other openly?

Sam blinked away the longing and wet her lips before continuing.

“Jo knew, but that was pretty much it. Even Orla confirmed today that she had no idea before. Maybe it will hit me when I go to bed, as I lie there and watch the shadows play on my ceiling. I don’t know. But right then, and still now, it felt and feels like the most liberating thing in the world. It felt good to say it.”

Well, she had come here to comfort Sam. Instead, the tables had been turned on her and as allayment went, Sam had done brilliantly to quiet Magdalene’s worries, and she smiled before changing the subject, since the maudlin mood had settled over them. It was time for mischief.

“I see you’re drawing—if we can generously call it that—chalk hearts. Any occasion?”

Sam nodded shyly and looked back at the smooth rock that had served as her canvas, where half of her ‘art’ had already been erased by the elements.

“I hadn’t even realized what I was doodling, honestly. But just before you appeared in my line of sight, I smelled your perfume, and I thought about how much I missed you.”

Well, mischief be damned. Magdalene blinked. Sam’s confession made her chest ache again, the pain somehow enticing, sweet in its succor.

“You saw me earlier, Sam.” Magdalene tried not to let on that the remark stirred something in her, but she wasn’t sure how to express her deep-seated guilt over not being able to do anything more under the circumstances.

“Ha, I thought exactly the same thing. That I tasted you just this morning.”

“Sam...” The word was more whimper than any other sound, and she could see Sam’s eyes widen with want.

“I miss you all the time. Maybe that’s why I’m sitting here drawing hearts.”

Magdalene’s heart gave a treacherous thump, melting instantly. But she knew this wasn’t the right moment, and nothing could at this moment be said out loud that would have lasting repercussions. So when she spoke, her own words sounded harsh to her own ears.

“They keep getting wiped out. And if that isn’t some kind of a metaphor...”

“Today is just freaking chock-full of metaphors!” Sam jumped up, careful of the shawl on her shoulders, and brushed off her pants before picking up the chalk again, drawing bigger, if not prettier hearts in place of the ones disappearing under the onslaught of the drizzle and the wind.

Magdalene just watched her, the silence between them stretching like spun glass that was solidifying in front of their eyes, and one wrong move would shatter the gentle twists and turns of the creation. With a deep breath, as if stilling herself for a moment, Sam charged into the breach.

“Look, I don’t care. This hasn’t been easy from the beginning. Nothing about you and me has been easy. I think I walked into some kind of dream between the night in New York and the day you showed up here, like God’s avenging angel.”

Magdalene got up slowly and busied herself with her skirt, Sam’s exasperation rubbing off on her.

Angels again, for goodness’ sake...

“I’m no angel, Sam.”

“Would you stop interrupting for once, you aggravating woman?!” Sam paced around, startling Willoughby with the tension evident in her voice. He raised his head and gave her a disgruntled half-meow before settling back down.

Magdalene stared at her, taken aback by the tone and the words.

“We have a deal, you and I. And I’m honoring my end of it. But know this: it’s not easy, and while waiting is not something that comes naturally for me, you do. Everything about you is as natural for me as breathing. Missing you, recognizing your scent and your steps. Loving you. It’s all natural for me. So if I have to draw these damn chalk hearts on stone for you every day, despite them getting erased, I will. Because I don’t care about how hard this is. My heart is still beating, as upset, as hurt, as full of longing as it is. And while it does still beat, it will always be full of you. I love you.”

Something crashed in the distance, the sound of thunder rumbling among the rocks, narrowing down her senses to a single point in the universe. Dark, stormy eyes, full of pain, full of longing, full of love. Love. Magdalene felt lightheaded as Sam simply looked back at her with such fervor, such selflessness. And immersed in the light of those tortured eyes, that tilt of Magdalene's world had disappeared entirely. Her balance, her very being, was suddenly in perfect alignment with everything around her. Three little words...

"Damn you, Sam Threadneedle." And with nothing but that curse, Magdalene was in Sam's arms one second and kissing her the next.

The timing, the circumstances, god... they were all wrong, and Magdalene felt she couldn't say it back, despite having been in love for weeks, perhaps even months. Maybe since these lips devouring hers had whispered the words of a long-dead, tormented Russian poet.

Magdalene wanted to shout her love from the very top of the Amber Cliff. She wanted to imprint it into every inch of Sam's skin. But for now, she could only give herself to this beloved mouth that devoured her with so much passion, so much hunger. And to that tongue she knew so intimately that thrust with so much determination, it stole her breath away. And to those hands that she had kissed and nipped and knew every inch of, and that had taken her apart and put her back together. The ones that now roamed her back before settling on her waist, sending little shockwaves up and down her spine and straight between her legs.

Sam would wait for her, too. And the knowledge that she was wanted, needed, loved enough to be waited for, filled Magdalene with so much strength. Strength to overcome, to move forward, to achieve her purpose, to do what she was supposed to, and then... Then, when what she had set out to accomplish was completed, she would confess, too. She would tell Sam how much she had been loved from the start. All along. After all, they had time. All the time in the world.

OF MARKED SKIN & BORROWED TIME

September began with the students returning and an uncharacteristic heat on the island, making even the ever-tired Willoughby sleepier and lazier. But it was for the best; the weather distracted pretty much everyone from the truncated curricula, from the lack of inter-house competitions, and made protests against Magdalene's leadership rare and quite feeble compared to what they could have been.

After all, nobody really wanted to stand outside in the unrelenting sun with placards, burn effigies, and yell at the implacable walls of the academy.

Magdalene was glad for the reprieve. However, it gave her way too much time to do something she had never done in her life prior to Sam. She pined. Yearned. Longed. She spent her days and her nights in a perpetual state of semi-arousal and semi-desire to cross the length of the faculty dormitory and knock on the one door that held everything she had ever wanted.

Sam looking at her with equal longing during every single staff meeting or joint activity did not help matters at all.

She had to do something before she became entirely too obvious. In fact, Magdalene assumed some people in her vicinity had surmised her state of mind.

On a routine visit to Boston in the middle of September, her mother gave her and her Agent Provocateur shopping bag—which was the real reason for Magdalene actually being on mainland—a very long look and pursed her lips. Magdalene was profoundly grateful that Candace chose not to comment on her mental state—she was entirely too distracted to sustain a real conversation—or on the contents of the peach-colored bag with its black satin ribbons.

Candace might not have asked, but Magdalene had the distinct notion her mother knew the nature of the content all too well. Luckily, she didn't have X-ray vision and couldn't see the crimson corset with its matching lacy thong through the luxurious packaging, but given the level of scrutiny, she might as well have.

They shared a lovely lunch, despite Magdalene's distracted mood, and Candace scowled only once, when they were interrupted by a call from George.

"Surely that school can wait for one afternoon. If this woman is as capable as you keep telling me she is, she shouldn't contact you 24/7. Good help is so hard to find these days..." Candace pouted and proceeded to tip fifty percent, despite her complaints throughout their meal that the service was slow. Magdalene hid her smile behind a napkin. Her mother was such a fraud sometimes.

EXCEPT THESE DAYS, George's phone calls were highly appreciated, because they had worked arduously to set up an extended weekend trip to Connecticut where Dragons competed against New Haven St. Jude's Private School for Girls in an ad hoc tournament.

Dragons trounced the receiving side soundly, but the competitions themselves didn't hold any interest for Magdalene, and she guessed they wouldn't have anyway, even if they weren't as one-sided. The crimson number was burning a hole in her luggage. And Sam prowling the sidelines of the soccer field, loudly cheering on Dragons' team in those ridiculous skinny jeans and that flannel shirt, did things to her insides.

On their last day in Connecticut, Magdalene ran into George in the hotel hallway and once they started talking, it seemed rude not to walk her friend to her room.

"A nightcap?" George's face lit up with a fire Magdalene did not recognize, like her secretary had already partaken in several of whatever beverage she had in mind. She was so joyful, so uncharacteristically upbeat, Magdalene smiled, and she could swear George's eyes glazed over. But when she shook her head to decline, her friend's face fell in such a distinct contrast, Magdalene blinked, taken aback.

“I’m sorry, George. It’s been a long weekend—”

“A massage then?” Hope returned to those light blue eyes, and Magdalene instinctively tightened her hold on her trench coat.

“Ah, no, dear, sorry. I just don’t feel quite like myself.” The lie rolled off her tongue easily, and she patted George’s arm. The desire to squirm was so strong, she thought she must be succumbing to her mother’s power of suggestion. George was her friend. Her best friend.

To confirm as much to herself and to George, Magdalene reached out and gave her secretary a quick squeeze around the shoulders before she turned on her heel and hurried towards the elevators. George’s features had held such disappointment, Magdalene wanted to make herself scarce, before George could call out after her.

Thankfully, thoughts of George were short-lived as she knocked on an almost identical door moments later, and the joy on the face that met her there was neither feverish nor strange.

Sam’s pure happiness morphed into profound desire in an instant, Magdalene’s stomach flipped as she crossed the threshold.

Sam stepped aside to let her in and locked the door behind her, and moved to the opposite side of the room, standing in the shadows. Magdalene decided that she had waited long enough and slowly undid her trench coat, exposing the corset, the satin encasing her breasts and waist, giving her a rather enticing look, if she said so herself.

And if she needed any confirmation, Sam’s eyes turning dark and slightly feral was more than sufficient. The ensemble clearly worked.

“Stand right there, Magdalene.”

Well, the commanding note in Sam’s voice was enough for her to want to do anything but stand. She ached to stretch like a cat under those eyes. But when she dropped the coat, Sam just tsked.

“I see obedience has not been enshrined in that new curriculum of yours, Headmistress. Be still. Or you won’t get what you came here for.”

Magdalene stopped, gulped, her inner muscles clenching reflexively around nothing, already so drenched, she felt like a river overflowing. God, when Sam spoke to her this way...

“Good girl. Now turn around and show me what you have for me.” Sam leaned back against the desk, not even six feet away and watched her, gray eyes leaving scorching marks on Magdalene’s skin as she turned, hands gripping the door, knees already shaky. The things that voice did to her...

“That’s very nice. Did you buy this when you went to Boston to have high tea with your mother, Headmistress?” Magdalene had the presence of mind to nod as Sam continued. “Did you sit there and imagine the things this little number would do to me when you finally showed me?”

“Ye... yes.” God, was this her voice? Shaking and hoarse, drowning in lust?

“That’s such dirty play, Headmistress. Because this little thing really works for me. But you knew that, didn’t you? You knew you would be playing dirty.” Sam licked her lips and Magdalene felt herself start to drip down her thighs.

“You wanted to show yourself off for me, didn’t you, Headmistress?”

Oh God, oh dear God...

There was something dark and menacing and absolutely irresistible in Sam’s tone, and Magdalene thought she might beg any second.

“Show yourself off then.”

She held her breath. Surely, Sam wasn’t implying what Magdalene thought she was. Except Sam leaned back against the desk even further, head slightly tilted to the side, those wicked eyes half-lidded, and Magdalene knew that it... It was exactly what her lover meant.

“Are you going to make me wait, Headmistress? Or are you going to do what you came here to do?”

Magdalene’s hands rose to her breasts, seemingly of their own volition. Her touch felt rough, unskilled as she plucked at the hardened nipples. Sam’s eyes narrowed farther. Magdalene could see her chest rise and fall faster, and the idea that her lover was this visibly aroused that she could not control her breathing made her swallow hard.

Not breaking eye contact, she slowly traced the lace of the corset downward where her drenched pussy was encased in nothing more than a sopping layer of silk and, without a second thought, tugged the panties down, exposing herself to Sam’s hungry gaze.

A loud exhalation was her reward when the thong fell to the floor, and the sound did unspeakable things to her as she slowly teased her own outer lips. Sam actually moaned, and Magdalene lowered her other hand and spread her legs a little more, giving her lover a better view.

She held herself open and delved between her wet folds. Sam’s hands gripped the edge of the desk, and Magdalene could not hold back her own moan. She had never done this, never touched herself in the presence of

anyone else, but this... This was beyond anything she'd ever imagined. As she slowly circled her clit, all the while holding herself open to Sam's ravenous stare, Magdalene feared that by the time her lover actually touched her, she would explode.

"Tell me..." Sam's words broke through her reverie and their eyes met again, Magdalene's fingers stroking faster now, that voice getting under her skin. She swallowed reflexively and licked her lips. Her breath was coming in harsh exhalations. How was she supposed to speak? How was she supposed to think when Sam was looking at her like this?

"Tell me, Headmistress. Tell me, what is it like to be fucking yourself for me?"

"Saaam..."

Sam was suddenly much closer, and Magdalene was instantly drunk on her body heat.

"Tell me how it feels, Headmistress or..." The eyes watched her with such raw power, that Magdalene was punch drunk.

"Or?" Magdalene trembled and nearly lost her gumption, or what little was left of it. Surely Sam would not make her leave. Surely...

"Or you will need to seek entertainment elsewhere, Headmistress." The wicked voice whispered right in her ear, the breath caressing the skin so sensitive, it made her pussy clench again, and she heard herself speak almost as soon as Sam's word died down in the quiet of the room.

"It fee... feels good, Sam." She stumbled over the simple sentence and sensed Sam's smile against the skin on her neck. Her fingers delved deeper, and Sam leaned back again, watching her.

She whimpered and Sam's mouth parted, those beautiful eyes now almost entirely black, pupils blown. The thought that solely watching her touch herself did this to her lover was arousing beyond anything she had ever experienced.

"Tell me." The sound was no more than a whisper.

"Ah..." Magdalene slid two fingers inside and her vision blurred. She would come any second. "It is so hot, Sam, you looking at me. To have your eyes on me as I touch myself. I want you to keep doing it. I want to come and I want you to watch, Sam."

She knew she was technically breaking the rules of whatever game they were playing, because now she was the one who was powerful, since Sam's gaze, her entire being, was focused on Magdalene's fingers fucking her own

pussy, and Magdalene realized she had gained the upper hand away, and that thought, that sly, seductive thought had her head spinning.

“What will you do when I come? When I fuck myself until I come screaming, Sam?”

She could actually hear Sam gritting her teeth, the sound jarring and yet so sensual, it had her trembling with such intensity, she thought she'd never climax. But the instant she lifted her eyes, Sam's were staring directly into hers and she knew it was all over.

Within a second, Sam was on her knees, and before Magdalene registered what was happening, her hand was withdrawn from her pussy and Sam's mouth was licking her essence off her fingers.

And then... Magdalene actually screamed before she had the presence of mind to bite her knuckles, because Sam began to devour her. Within a second of that first lick, she was coming, and then, a minute later, she was coming again, in waves so hard, she realized she was making a mess all over the floor, gushing, head thumping against the door, knees buckling. Only Sam's strong hands held her upright while that mouth never let up until she was coming for the third time in probably as many minutes, her teeth leaving deep grooves on the skin of her hand.

Yes, she could say with confidence that the crimson number had worked quite well.

The next morning, before their departure back to Dragons, Sam had to pay for a pillow Magdalene had torn to shreds, and Magdalene had to make an emergency run to a nearby pharmacy for a pack of bandaids, because the teeth marks on her skin—the ones she'd left there while trying to keep herself quiet—were so prominent, there was no way to pretend they weren't exactly what they appeared.

Every time she looked down at the marks, Magdalene's brain transported her back to Sam's hotel room. To its door... to its desk, where Sam pretty much reenacted Magdalene's fantasy of being eaten out on a flat surface. To its bed where Sam had made her come twice from behind, on her hands and knees, screaming herself hoarse into the aforementioned ruined pillow.

By the time it was 4AM and Magdalene needed to get back to her own room, she could barely walk, and Sam had a decidedly smug expression on her swollen mouth. Magdalene wished she'd cared more about payback, when all that really mattered to her was the encore.

REGARDLESS, it made for some amazing material to reminisce about at every staff meeting, where she'd try not to stare at Sam for too long, because she would get hazy with memories of biting through the cheap cotton of the hotel-issued pillowcase to avoid waking up the entire block because it was her fifth orgasm. And my god, she had never been this vocal—or this debauched—in her lifetime.

It also made for an even better distraction every time Orla Fenway continued to try to undermine her left and right as retaliation for Magdalene's perceived temerity to 'sell out' the school to the 'dangerous locals' who were 'desecrating the hallowed grounds' by renovating the old Astronomy Tower on Viridescent Cliff.

Fenway could curse her very existence as many times as she liked to, however, because the slow-but-sure transformation was well underway. And according to the plans Magdalene had signed off on, the finished product was going to be a state-of-the-art hotel. In addition, given the fact that staying there would cost an arm and a leg, it would be highly unlikely to attract anyone from a different—and therefore much frowned upon by Orla and her disciples—social strata than the families of the affluent Dragons students.

Sam, being the woman of her word, kept the promise she gave on their morning after in Connecticut and stayed away from her, much to Magdalene's chagrin.

And while the overall breakneck speed of her days, with busy mornings and even busier afternoons, assured that Magdalene stayed well and truly occupied and didn't allow her to dwell on the length and skill of those fingers too much, it was breakfast time at the Mess Hall that was the hardest. By far.

Sam would sit with Joanne, who Magdalene suspected had figured out the situation afoot, and was mostly either teasing the math teacher or nudging her to prevent Sam from staring at Magdalene. Because Sam—no matter how rule-abiding she was—was in love, much to Magdalene's joy, and could not for the life of her keep herself from said staring.

So, especially when Orla wasn't around, Magdalene would play with her first mug of morning coffee, trace the thick porcelain rim, slowly stir the golden liquid with her silver spoon, savor the feeling of it warming her hands, and stare back at Sam. Then she'd raise the cup to her lips and slowly drink in the life-giving ambrosia, enjoying the prolonged sip, and Sam would cross and recross her legs, clearly pressing her thighs together to alleviate some of the tension. Magdalene loved this game very much.

But all playing aside, on the very rare occasion that Sam let her guard down, usually when they were alone on the Amber Cliff, Magdalene could see a shadow of something in those eyes. Something akin to worry. Something akin to pain. And while there could be a million reasons for Sam to fret, there was really only one for her to be hurt over.

Dusk was slowly chasing out daylight outside her apartment's windows and Willoughby was snoozing carefree in her lap, warm and heavy. Earlier, she had lit candles and he'd side-eyed her.

"Sam isn't the only one who likes candlelight, buster." He chirped something back at her, and she winked at him. "Yes, I don't believe that fib either." But the candlelight gave her little space the cosiness of memories and the intimacy of longing for her lover.

Despite falling hard and fast and seemingly way before Sam, Magdalene had not said those three words out loud. She couldn't. She had tried and had repeatedly failed, one thing always holding her back. Well, two things.

First, she was still very much bound by her contract and her responsibility to the school. And while contract be damned—Magdalene's contrary streak was a mile wide, and sticking it to Joel Tullinger and Stanton Alden was a decidedly enticing factor—the school was the main obstacle that really stood between them.

The darkness engulfed the island and she checked the time, the Vacheron on her wrist, heavy as ever, kept reminding her about her word. And while these days the watch was no longer a shackle of vengeance, it was one of responsibility. The precariousness of Dragons, the uncertain path towards its survival, kept Magdalene up at night, and the knowledge that, if she were fired, the trustees would not hesitate to shutter the doors of the school, was unthinkable.

And with Dragons between them, the beasts not yet quite mollified and not yet safe, Magdalene did not feel right declaring herself. Her heart wasn't split, but her loyalties were, and so were her commitments, and it felt dishonest towards Sam to tell her now, when Magdalene wasn't free to openly pursue a relationship.

She looked at Willoughby, still asleep in her lap and scratched his ear. His bicolored eyes opened slightly and he yawned. Magdalene cuddled him closer.

"I love her, Willoughby."

How wonderful it felt to say it out loud. *She loved.* It was living and

breathing inside her, slowly growing roots and settling in her chest, warm and intricate and safe. And these roots steadily took the space where fear and revenge once lived, demanding her full attention, grabbing her by the throat and refusing to let go every time Sam as much as looked at her. Every time Magdalene as much as thought about that contemplative gaze, those lovely lips, that wondrous mind that challenged and enthralled her.

Yes, she was so in love; she was glowing with it. Every single corner of the sprawling mansion was filled with it, the light spilling through the cracks in the granite and illuminating the space within. The sensation of it seeping through what was left in that hole in the middle of her chest, dripping under her feet everywhere she went, leaving golden traces on the black floor boards and ashen tiles.

The second reason she hadn't told Sam she loved her was that they had time. They had all the time in the world. Amidst the yearning and charged gazes, amidst the teasing and games, amidst lust and closets, they had time.

Willoughby grumbled as Magdalene stood up, but quickly settled down on her now vacated chair, enjoying the body heat she left behind. As she looked from her apartment's window into the stormy night sprawling in front of her, a lonely figure slowly made its way from Amber Cliff towards the school, illuminating her path with a bright beam. The hand on the flashlight was steady despite the wind, and Magdalene marveled at the surety of Sam's steps and at her beloved's unwavering grasp. As unfaltering as Sam's heart. As strong as their love.

Nothing was going to come between them. Not the trustees, not Orla and her foolishness and not the school. Magdalene would merely pay her dues first, make sure she was irreplaceable in her importance to the survival of Dragons and then... Then, she would play her cards and they would be together. They had all the time in the world.

Until they didn't. Until something as simple as child's play took all the time away from her, from them, and left her reeling.

FOR WEEKS, Magdalene had been extremely careful in her missives to Sam. Some texts here and there, some notes, occasionally delivered by Willoughby, though he took to the chore with the decidedly humiliated air of

someone so above the task at hand—well, paw—that Magdalene tried not to burden him too much. After all, the gent had to have his dignity.

And she had really tried not to have any rendezvous on campus. Orla was watching them like a hawk. The gossip mill was in full swing, and it was a well-known fact that Sam had no poker face to save her life. *Dangerous* didn't even come close to how Magdalene would describe their situation.

So why, when Sam approached her in the Mess Hall one evening and whispered that she'd wait for her in the Sky Blue attic at 10PM, did Magdalene not recognize the foul play at hand? Why did her heart fill with hope and longing and the desperate desire to be held by those lanky arms even for a few moments?

Why didn't she see that this was how their time was about to run out?

And why didn't she question the place of the clandestine assignation? Of all the possible and impossible nooks and crannies of Dragons? The dusty, never-used attic was quite a wretched space which, as she'd announced during a faculty meeting, would undergo a massive renovation during the next school break. It was crammed with the archives that had been moved from the flooded basement, an assortment of old school furniture, and who knows what else, and thoroughly uninviting to any variety of amorous encounters.

Yet despite absolutely all the clues pointing towards it, Magdalene did not see the danger coming. Or their time running out.

But run out, it did. And she did not cotton on to it until it was too late and she was in the dusty attic in Sam's embrace.

When she'd climbed the rotting floorboards leading to the cramped space beneath the roof, Willoughby on her heels, she could see the flickering light that Sam had lit and thanked her stars that her lover had arrived first. Otherwise Magdalene might have broken her neck on the narrow and stooped stairs.

As she finally crossed the dingy threshold, she saw a single frail lightbulb, weak and perilous. And there Sam was, pacing the cluttered and creaking floor, holding a flashlight close.

Willoughby streaked by her and ran towards Sam for the now customary headbutt to her ankles before predictably getting out of the reach of Sam's hands. Magdalene looked around for a moment and immediately regretted her curiosity. 'Filthy' wasn't even close to the state of things. 'Cluttered' did not do it any kind of justice, either.

She thought back to the staff meeting and to Orla's protestations that the attic was fine, and once again tamped down the impulse to lock Orla Fenway in it for a few hours and *then* ask her if it really was 'not that bad'.

It was worse than bad. Since that last meeting, the rains of the past few weeks must have damaged the roof, as the floor was wet in patches.

By the time Sam finally turned to her, Magdalene knew her face mirrored Willoughby's perfectly: Disgust.

Still, as absolutely disgruntled as he was at his surroundings, he burrowed among some furniture, finding an old, cushioned seat, and rolled into his customary loaf-like form.

Magdalene's own mood was a combination of elation at seeing Sam, mixed with a blatant desire to not be in the space they currently occupied. She gave Sam a quick kiss, leaned back, opened her mouth to say something about how abhorrent everything around them was, thought better of it, and went in for another kiss. This one lingered, moving like waves, each deeper and more dangerous, and she could sense Sam's hold on her already fragile libido careen. It mirrored her own tenuous grip perfectly, down to trembling hands and a heaving chest.

When they parted, Sam was breathing heavily and all but cross-eyed. Magdalene smirked and reached out with her thumb to wipe her lipstick off Sam's still-panting mouth. Then she pecked Sam on the tip of her nose before looking around again, her disgust renewed.

"So on top of being a total disaster zone, which the trustees have not allotted me enough funding to fix during the summer, this place is now wet too? Well, maybe with the roof leaking, they'll approve the budget for emergency renovations, and we'll close down this wing for a while, even before the fall break. I am not sure what happened here, but it's in much worse shape than it was when I inspected it. Whoever decided it was good for storage needs to be fired. The whole place is one big electrical and fire hazard now."

Magdalene looked up at the light fixture that started to fade in and out, as if trying with all its might to continue working. But all of its endeavors were for naught.

As it stopped flickering, it emitted a strange crackling sound. The bulb shorted out, and they were plunged into darkness, save for the single bright beam of her flashlight which Sam turned on immediately, shining in the dark and dust.

Her heart suddenly in her throat, Magdalene tried to keep her voice steady.

“Darling, I understand the impulse of wanting to see each other. Goddess knows it’s been a week since Connecticut and I’ve missed you like crazy, but why on Earth did you choose this place to meet?” She faked total calmness and indifference, going as far as brushing off her skirt with a rather offended gesture, as if whatever debris was clinging to it from her walk further into the cavernous attic was particularly offensive to her, and picked up Willoughby. With some difficulty, she hefted him over her shoulder, the cat huddling closer to her, his claws leaving tiny prickles of awareness on her skin. A distant thought about consulting the vet about his diet was cut short by Sam.

“What do you mean? I got your note and came like you told me to. I mean, I replied at dinner that I would.” Sam attempted to not shine the light directly in Magdalene’s face, but she knew no amount of shadows could hide her astonishment, chills running down her spine.

“I didn’t leave you any notes, Sam. And you were *telling me*, not responding. I didn’t even get a chance to ask you anything, I had no choice but to follow. I thought it was an odd choice and couldn’t leave you alone in this godforsaken place, simply waiting for me.”

Magdalene tried to swallow around the lump in her throat, a sense of premonition gripping her, numbing her hands and drying her mouth instantly.

Sam’s, “But who...?” was interrupted by the slamming of the attic door, followed by a metal screech. Then the room fell into an eerie quiet, except for that crackling noise that had resumed somewhere near them.

“We need to get out of here, Sam.”

“Yeah... how about we...”

Just as Sam was about to finish her sentence, the electrical sound intensified, followed by loud hissing. Magdalene instantly recognized the unmistakable scent. Sam beat her to the punch, but there was no reason to even say it out loud.

“Something’s burning, Magdalene. Quickly.”

Sam grabbed Magdalene’s hand and turned her flashlight towards the door. Making their way past the broken furniture and boxes, a clamoring Willoughby in Magdalene’s free arm, they half jogged the remaining twenty feet. For all the debris and garbage, it might as well have been twenty miles.

By the time they reached the door, the flashlight had been rendered moot.

The entire far side of the attic was on fire, rapidly moving towards them as it burned its way through paper and old wood, lighting up everything like kindling, despite the water damage. With the fire set loose, the attic quickly turned into a raging inferno.

Sam's voice was panicked, barely above a ragged whisper.

"Shit, push the door..."

"Samantha Threadneedle, what the hell do you think I'm doing?" Magdalene, irritated with herself for being so easily outwitted, so easily ensnared like a damn rat in a trap, rammed her entire upper body into it, while holding on to Willoughby. To her abject horror, the door didn't budge. A loud crash sounded as something collapsed on the other end of the attic, where the fire was making its way through the debris.

Her own efficiency and precaution were to blame for impeding them now. There was nobody to curse but herself, since she'd given the goddamn order to make this place more secure.

"The latch! Remember the massive latch we installed to keep the girls out?"

Sam nodded as she pushed at the door herself, putting her whole weight into it. The old wood rattled a bit on the hinges but did not give in significantly.

Whatever noises they had heard before were probably the footsteps of whomever had lured them here, then slammed and secured the door from the outside.

Who would do this? From rats and flowers to this?

They were locked in with the fire ravaging a few feet away. The sharp smell of melting plastic and burning, rotting wood was nauseating, and it was all Magdalene could do not to gag.

She tried to focus on the task at hand, but all she could think about was how foolish she had been, how arrogant in her absolute belief in her own power, in her own immortality. And in that they had time.

They had both fallen prey to the simplest, most imbecilic trap in the history of tricks and now they were confronted with the consequences of said arrogance.

With smoke rapidly filling the attic as the fire made quick work of the old shelves and crates, one look at Sam's grime-stained face told her that the door was by far not the only obstacle they were battling.

Sam's eyes were wide, the whites almost entirely consuming the beautiful

ashen irises while the parted lips were colorless. The scene in the elevator from months ago, flashed across her mind. Claustrophobia.

No, no, no...

“Sam...” It took all of Magdalene’s strength and presence of mind to keep her voice absolutely calm, but she could feel her hands trembling, even as she held the squirming, frightened cat. In front of her eyes, perhaps sensing that Magdalene’s resolve was frayed, Sam grit her teeth and took a deep breath.

“The lock and whatever else is holding this thing may be new, but the hinges and the wood are old as dirt, and probably brittle. If we push together on this end...”

With the fire burning hot at their backs and Magdalene clutching the trembling Willoughby in her right arm, their shoulders hit the door with perfect synchronicity. Two tries, and the hinges flew off the rotten frame, just as Sam had predicted. What they hadn’t anticipated was that the two of them would spill onto the floor, propelled by the force of their push and the splintering of the door.

“You okay?” In the light of the blaze consuming the attic, Sam’s eyes were made of coal and fire, the anger in them just as raw and just as deadly, mirroring the rage that was burning in Magdalene’s. Sam nodded, grabbing the frightened Willoughby from Magdalene’s arms and holding him to herself tightly. “Good.” Magdalene gulped down the bile rising in her throat and shook off the remnants of fear. When she spoke again, her voice was dead calm. “We have to get the children and the staff out.”

BEFORE SAM COULD NOD AGAIN, Magdalene grabbed her free hand and took off. She didn’t turn to see the Sky Blue Dragon breathe fire, consuming itself, spewing ash and destruction on everything around it. There was no time. The beast that she was sworn to protect was wounded, and she had no idea how to save it, or if she’d even be able to. She might as well try and salvage what she could, though, and she’d be damned if she’d fail. With Sam, Willoughby still in her arms, following her closely, Magdalene felt the earlier tenuous hold on time yet again, her fingers gripping tight.

Please, hold on... Don’t let go...

Whether she said that to herself or to the wounded dragon throbbing in the throes of death around her, she didn’t know, as she raced to save what she

still could.

OF RAGING INFERNOS & BROKEN SHACKLES

*B*y the time Magdalene marshaled the faculty, the attic was destroyed. She tried to take some small measure of solace in the fact that it was her flawlessly designed, religiously practiced, and now perfectly executed evacuation plan that saved everyone, but the aftertaste in her mouth was stale. All smoke and bile.

When the roof of the Sky Blue wing had collapsed and the fire was consuming the Amber's third floor, with Viridescent slowly crumbling around itself, Magdalene wanted to shake the damn volunteer firefighters.

Why did she think that, despite the wings being kindling, the Main Hall with its marble and granite could still be saved? Their dejected faces and resolute head shakes at her mere mention that something might still be done for the central building were a depressing sight.

There was no saving the school.

The thought hit her dead center of her chest and burrowed there, as if the Dragon was trying to hide from the inferno he himself had unleashed. He whimpered, wounded, and Magdalene wanted to weep. She had tried so hard for this damned place, and now that she had finally made her tenuous peace with it, when she had at last taken the role she had always been destined for, it was all dying around her.

She turned, unable to take her eyes off the fire, the crashing shingles and breaking glass cutting her to the very core.

I won't be able to save the school.

She had failed, and damn if it didn't hurt. Magdalene closed her eyes and felt a tear roll down her cheek.

How many times had she dreamed of this very scenario? How many

times, at sixteen, at twenty-six, at damn forty-six had she wished it all to hell, wanted to watch it burn? And now that it was happening, now that the useless men from town stood around her, wringing their hands, shrugging, and looking away? Now that the entire student body and faculty were standing around the ash-strewn grass of the quad in small groups, watching the beast die in front of them? Why did it feel like she had killed it herself?

A familiar voice was calling her name, and Magdalene turned around, because the panic in it was anything but familiar. Sam, her long legs eating away at the ground at superhuman speed, almost barreled into her, with Joanne somehow keeping up behind her.

“We’re missing two! Headmistress, Mr. Robson! We’re missing two—” As Sam shouted above the roar of the fire, above the scared chatter of the crowd of girls huddled together and the teachers doing roll calls to ensure they were all there, Magdalene heard another ragged call full of desperation.

“Amanda! Amanda!” Lily, in clothing that was about three sizes too big for her, was rushing towards them. “She’s missing, she’s not here, Sam! Headmistress! Please, please, please... Professor Fenway took her aside after dinner, said they needed to talk about the scholarship girls’ situation, but she never came back to the dormitory. I know she didn’t, because she always stops by to wish me good night. Even if it’s just for a second, she always stops by. I thought she was with Suzie on the other side of the quad, but she’s not there and I looked everywhere. You have to find her, you have to. Please!”

Her thoughts on the school perishing would have to wait because there was something much worse and it was the goddamn place not doing it alone and dragging one of Magdalene’s kids with it.

She knew she must have looked possessed when she whirled on the Fire Chief.

“You heard her! We have a child inside. Possibly an adult as well. And if I find Fenway, I will kill her myself for being a stubborn mule and not leaving those girls alone!”

Robson, the balless waste of space, took one look behind him, where the fire was now ravaging the third floor of the Main Hall, and shook his head.

“Ma’am, my people are not equipped to go in there. We don’t have respirators or any other such gizmos. We’re a volunteer department.”

Magdalene wanted to whale into him, to tear his head off, but in the light of the condemned school raging behind him, she knew her anger was

misplaced. And it wasn't really anger at all.

"Are you telling me that, knowing that there are people in that building and one of them a minor, you will not go in?" Her voice was taut as a whip as she stared him down, desperately trying to not let her fear show.

"Ma'am, I can't order my men into a fire on a wild goose chase. We don't even know where the child could be... But if you just listen to me..."

Lily's cry of terror and obvious desperation at the words of the Fire Chief seemed to cut through the mayhem before she dashed off towards the burning building.

"Lily, stop! Lily!" But all the shouting was for naught, and Magdalene watched as the girl disappeared through the massive doors thrown open by the earlier exodus. Sam's aghast ashen face mirrored hers, she was certain.

Well, damn...

"Make that two minors, Robson." Magdalene didn't even wait for him to shake his head mournfully again. "If you're not helping, Robson, you're in my way. Get out of it." Her shoulders felt constricted, and in the scant seconds it took her to spring into action, she shrugged off her blazer. Dior. One of her favorites. Blinking, she watched as it fell onto the muddied grass, soon to be ground into the wet earth by countless feet.

Her grounds were desecrated, after all...

Hadn't that been what she'd thought when she signed that contract for the Viridescent Observatory? Hadn't that been how she'd felt when she made every single little change? When she fought tooth and nail to make sure Dragons had enough oxygen to breathe one more day, one more week, one more month?

And now it was all in vain. Ash was falling like snow on her once pristine woolen blazer, marring its black lines with gray, leaving it dirty and worthless.

Just as well...

Without a backward glance, Magdalene took off towards the burning school, overtaking Sam, who had run after Lily.

"Jesus, Magdalene!" Well behind her now, Sam was left cursing.

The moment she crossed the threshold into the Main Hall, Magdalene knew that everything was lost, and the last vestiges of hope for the stone and the glass were gone. The school was groaning around her, consumed by fire, turning into rubble and ruin. And that deathbed rattle was both frightening and enraging. But there was no time for fear or anger just yet.

First they had to find Amanda and Lily, then she had to commit the murder of one Orla Fenway, for which Magdalene was absolutely convinced she'd be acquitted by a jury of her peers. And she'd grieve for Dragons when her day was over and she was alone with the emptiness that was sure to consume her soon enough.

The entrance was filled with smoke but appeared sturdy, untouched by fire so far, yet she could see the flames feeding off the dying beast just a few flights of stairs above.

By the time Sam reached Magdalene, she was standing in the middle of a corridor, completely lost. In the dark, with only the fire from above casting an eerie glow and the burning wing across from them illuminating the sky, she realized she had no idea which way they should go next.

“Sam, I can't...”

Magdalene was scared. She was also resolute, and she needed Sam to help and not ask any questions, to understand her, even when she herself did not fully comprehend what was happening to her.

“Magdalene...” She poured all her determination and fear into a glare and Sam trailed off.

“Whatever you are about to say, Sam, please don't. Not now. Lily is in here somewhere, no doubt ready to run headlong into the fire if she thinks Amanda might be there. And that old fool is probably in here, causing more trouble as well. We can't leave anyone behind. I can't do it, Sam. I can't chance it.”

And Sam did understand. The contrary look on her face, that contemplative one of trying to get Magdalene out of the building, was immediately replaced with one of concentration. Magdalene wanted to weep.

“If Orla made Amanda come over after dinner, she'd have taken the conversation to her office. I'm sure Lily was thinking the same thing. You stay here.” Sam looked at the staircase filled with smoke and coughed. “I'll run up there to see. It's our best bet.”

Magdalene no longer wanted to weep. Instead her determination to kill people resurfaced with vengeance. Certain people. One Orla Fenway. Preferably with her own bare hands, in the most gruesome way possible. And she wanted to thrash herself for kicking this can of poison down the road, and not dealing with Fenway sooner.

“Like hell you'll go alone. Let's go.”

Magdalene took off with Sam hot on her heels. They entered the winding

hallway side by side, and Sam pulled Magdalene to the left. They were going by memory since there was almost no visibility now as the smoke got thicker. On the floor above them, the burning wood cracked, and they could hear pieces falling near and far.

Magdalene's heart broke into a hundred pieces. She remembered the first time she'd stepped foot on the island and the glorious sight of the mansion appearing before her as she climbed the cliffs. It was like nothing else, glory to the masonry masters of old, a refuge against storm and heartache. And now it was dying all around, its last breaths heartbreaking and horrifying.

Despite the fire not yet making it to the second floor, the smoke was heavy, and Magdalene reached into the pockets of her skirt to find not one but two handkerchiefs. Flimsy and stylish as they were, they helped with her occasional perimenopausal hot flashes and would have to suffice to protect them from inhaling more of the acrid fumes.

After a few minutes, they stopped again. It was getting harder and harder to breathe, and Magdalene could tell that, despite Sam's strong sense of direction, they were lost.

Still, first things first and breathing was an undisputed priority.

"Get on your knees!" Reaching out to where Sam stood peering into the smoke-filled hallway, Magdalene tugged on her arm, and as Sam turned to her, she could see the mischief in her lover's eyes and her own went wide, realizing what she had just said.

"Yes, ma'am." Sam chuckled, and Magdalene's heart did that silly somersault it always did when she stopped to think about how much she actually loved this woman, how much she absolutely adored that, even in moments like these, Sam's brilliant—if dirty—mind found something to distract her from the distinct possibility of dying.

"Sam..." Still, she rolled her eyes, but her long-suffering sigh was interrupted by a fit of coughing, and seeing her distressed, Sam set off again—whether with any sense of direction or at random, Magdalene did not know. Just as they were about to start crawling, a small voice from the opposite side drew their attention.

"Teach, Teach, here. She's here somewhere." Lily's silhouette in the smoke was like a beacon, and Sam pulled Magdalene towards it. The girl was crouching in the long corridor that held the faculty offices. Magdalene wanted to hug Lily. They were found. She was found. Then she wanted to shake the girl, because who even does that? Run into a burning building? Did

she have a death wish?

Magdalene chose to ignore her own behavior and alternately focused on being relieved about Lily being all right, and angry at her for running away and risking her life in the first place. Still, the girl was okay, and without a doubt she'd saved their hides, since they'd been about to take off in the opposite direction and probably straight into more danger.

Now it was a matter of finding Orla's office.

On their hands and knees, all three of them coughing more and more as they slowly passed one door after another, it was becoming evident that they wouldn't last long. Magdalene untied her handkerchief and tied it around Lily's face. Just as she was about to succumb to another coughing fit, Sam's victorious exclamation to her left almost toppled her over.

When she crawled closer, she could see the ugly, knotted monstrosity of the macrame that decorated the entrance to the former headmistress' office. Hell, Magdalene had to get rid of almost three boxes of half moth-eaten, half unfinished pieces when she'd taken over Orla's office. The woman really had no concept of finishing anything she started, and if she did, without fail, it wound up being grotesque.

Regardless, monstrous or not—and in her mind's eye Magdalene could picture the hideous design of the one that ended up serving as their beacon in the dark haze—this piece of macrame was a lifesaver right now. When they pushed through the door, their three bodies almost fell over the threshold in their haste.

The fire that was tearing down the adjacent wing illuminated the space through the window and revealed a silhouette slouching in the visitor's chair in the corner. Lily was a hairbreadth ahead of Sam, already gently shaking her girlfriend.

“Amanda! Wake up, sweetheart, wake up!”

Coughing violently, the girl staggered to her feet, only to be pulled down into a crouch, where she proceeded to throw up and cough again.

“What's... happening?”

“Sweetie, the school is on fire.” Magdalene gentled her voice, all the while trying to maintain an air of nonchalance that wouldn't alarm the already sick and discombobulated girl.

“Amanda, where is Professor Fenway?” Sam was looking around wildly, clearly searching for Fenway, but Magdalene was fairly certain Amanda was the only one in the office. Because if Orla were here, Magdalene would have

pummeled her with any of the thousand dirty mugs lining every surface, and she never had that kind of luck.

Amanda tried to say something, but a coughing fit interrupted her, and she resorted to shaking her head and shrugging her shoulders, leaning heavily on Lily, whose tears of relief were streaming down her face, leaving tracks on her soot-covered cheeks.

“You don’t know, okay.” Looking around one more time, Sam tried to get more concrete information out of the girl. “Has she been here with you at all?” Another shake of the disheveled, blonde head and more coughing. Magdalene, however, had had enough. Even if Fenway lay passed out under the debris of dirty pizza boxes under her desk, she was past caring. The former headmistress could go hang, well, burn in this case.

“Amanda, sweetheart, can you walk or crawl? We need to get out of here and quick.” Lily’s voice was tender and unhurried, belying the tremor in her hands.

The moment they entered the hallway, it became abundantly clear that visibility had decreased even more and they would likely get lost within seconds.

“Sam, do you think you can get us out of here?” Magdalene tried to keep her voice as neutral as possible, maybe even inject it with a level of determination she was no longer feeling. Not when everything around them was a massive abyss with no clues as to how they would in fact begin to navigate it.

She knew she’d failed on the determination and resoluteness front, because she could hear the fear in her tone herself, and Sam’s eyes blinking at her with concern told her as much. Just as Sam opened her mouth, something brushed past Magdalene’s ankles and before she could hear the disgruntled high-pitched meow, she knew her knight in orange armor had arrived.

“Oh my god, Willoughby!” Sam laughed and Magdalene scowled. “Seriously, did absolutely nobody take the evacuation training seriously? It’s about running out of the damn building, not running into it.”

The cat had indeed run barreling into them and was now twisting and turning around Magdalene’s ankles, circling in place as if hurrying them up, clearly set to lead them through the smoke.

They made their way along the same route they had crawled before, guided by Willoughby, who was darting back and forth. It was on the stairs,

half dragging Amanda with them, that they heard something above them collapse.

Magdalene had never witnessed death. Plenty of people she knew had died, but somehow she had reached forty six years on this earth without ever personally being present for it. It seemed the universe had decided that, if she was to finally be there for a demise, it would be something truly horrifying.

The death rattle she had heard earlier, the floors caving in on the Amber and Viridescent wings, was now directly above her as the flames consumed the upper levels of the Main Hall and were tearing them down, collapsing the wooden beams supporting the attic and the third floor on top of the marble and granite of the one below.

The mansion no longer moaned around her. Dragons screamed, a torturous, gory death, and Magdalene knew the tears streaming down her cheeks were not entirely from smoke, the emptiness in her chest, the remnants of an age-old wound, was filling with that acrid air, as if desperate to keep the final transformation of Dragons safe inside her. That it might also kill her seemed irrelevant now. And so Magdalene did not wipe her eyes. Someone had to weep for the dying, magnificent creature, and that someone might as well be her, even if it was trying to take her to hell with it.

In hindsight, perhaps she should have felt less sympathy for the beast, after all. Because no creature was more dangerous than one in the throes of perishing.

As she spearheaded the group down the stairs and towards the gaping wound where the main entrance had once been—the firefighters having torn it off its hinges to create a larger entrance—she could feel the old wooden steps vibrate under her feet and silently prayed that they'd hold just a few seconds longer, just long enough for her and Sam to shepherd the girls out.

Magdalene heard it when her feet hit the dark granite of the ground floor and Amanda and Lily were almost abreast with her.

Dragons' last breath.

The entire building shook, as if the three dragons were making their way from under the foundation and taking flight, escaping the confines of the fiery inferno that was consuming their prison.

Her heart stopped and in front of her eyes, the staircase that Sam and Willoughby were descending, taking the last few steps on a run, collapsed.

In slow motion, Magdalene saw Sam push Lily and Amanda away and safely into her arms as the immense, hand-carved redwood railing and the

stone plates it rested on buried her lover and her cat beneath their weight.

She must have screamed. She could feel her throat burning from the strain of the sound that was surely emanating from her, except she could not hear it. Magdalene heard nothing. Not Lily's pleas, not Amanda's calls for help directed towards the outside, nor the cry of Joanne who suddenly appeared at her side.

Nothing. Her entire existence narrowed to the pile of stone and wood in front of her and her vision blurred. She shook it off, in an instant running back towards the fire, her hands already grabbing at the fragments of the balustrade as someone tried to pull her back.

Later, she would be told that it was the Fire Chief who tried to carry her out of the building, only to be backhanded and cursed out before Magdalene proceeded to dig into the debris with her bare hands.

Magdalene didn't recall any of this. She didn't remember hysterically screaming for the firefighters to "fucking do their job." All she had known was that she had to get Sam from under the rubble.

The stone shards were hot, burning her, and the splinters from the wood cut at her skin, but she heeded none of it. Her blood seeping down her fingers was making her efforts more difficult, her hands now slippery and clumsy from the pain, but she did not stop.

Time stood still, and it was just her and the ruin that was holding her entire life underneath its debris. And all she could think of, the only thought burning worse than the blood being scorched into her skin, was that she had not told Sam that she loved her. How many times had she had the chance to do so? How many times had she been one breath away from confessing that she was, in fact, the first to fall, the first to know that this warmth in her chest, this feeling of being whole for once in her life, was because she loved?

And the horror of having kept the enormity of this feeling, the life-changing importance of it, from Sam? It stabbed at her. Even as the dust and smoke engulfed her, Magdalene knew it wasn't what she was choking from.

The tears she had shed for Dragons were now blinding her. They fell for her own carelessness, for her own impotence, because she could accomplish so much, and had power over so many, yet she couldn't turn back time to give voice to everything that had sustained her these past months, everything that had made her whole and everything that had given her hope.

Her eyes burned from the soot and the tears, and as she shoved her hand under a large chunk of wall, trying to lift it up, the precarious support the slab

was resting on cracked. Magdalene expected to feel her wrist crushed by the hundred pound marble, yet all she heard was the crack of metal and glass, and while the pain in her forearm was considerable, she knew her bones weren't broken.

Slowly, biting her lip as to not scream in pain, Magdalene peered into the dust-covered opening only to realize that her salvation from having her forearm crushed, was the one piece of Dragons she had hated and worn as penance her entire life. The quarter of a million dollar Vacheron, glass smashed, was turned sideways on her wrist, as it usually was, since it was so large for her, and the wedge it thus formed was holding up the piece of the school's wall.

She wiggled her fingers, and when the pain did not increase, tried to pull her hand out only to realize that Dragons would likely demand a sacrifice for it. Magdalene braced herself then wrenched her arm, her wrist coming out of the cuff that was the crushed watch, abraded and bloody.

Joanne screamed as Magdalene freed herself and tried to grab her injured appendage.

"Oh my god, Magdalene, oh my god, you're hurt, stop! Stop! Chief! Chief!"

"Dorsea, I don't have time for this, Sam is still there!" Magdalene growled as she turned to the older woman.

As she struggled against Joanne's hold, exhausted, her lungs still burning with every breath, the firefighters finally did something worthy of their profession, and as they lifted the larger part of the wall and balustrade, Sam's motionless shape was revealed with Willoughby sheltered in the safety of her arms, hissing bloody murder at everyone who was reaching for them, for his savior.

Magdalene's heart hammered in her chest as she finally freed herself, falling to her knees in front of Sam. Somewhere in the recesses of her mind, she noticed Willoughby's head butt and pitiful meows, but she couldn't...

Please, Sam, please!

Shoving aside the hands of the men around her, she reached for Sam. When her blackened fingers finally felt a pulse fluttering under Sam's skin, only then did she allow them to pull her back.

As the firefighters lifted Sam up and overturned the rubble, Magdalene's eyes caught the glimpse of the crushed Vacheron disappearing under the smoldering redwood and she closed her eyes. Despite the bloody wrist, the

torn up knuckles and burned fingertips, Magdalene felt lighter, her shoulders free of the weight of the thirty-year-old handcuff. The sight of Sam's chest rising and falling as she was carried out of the building that was collapsing in on itself behind them, was something to hold on to, as was Willoughby now purring in her arms as she slowly crossed the old, worn-out threshold of the Main Hall for the last time.

OF SINGED FINGERS & MAJESTIC SUNRISES

There were times when men had their uses. And then there were times when men were just... there.

As Magdalene made her way out of the crumbling ruins—the Main Hall now completely engulfed by flames, Willoughby in her grip—she hurried after the stretcher carrying Sam to the clearing on the far side of the grounds, close to where the cliffs opened up towards the ocean to wait for the arrival of the town doctor. The firefighter who looked like he at least had the basic idea of what he was doing gave Sam a thorough once-over, checking her vitals and nodded at Magdalene before leaving them alone. As she dropped to her knees by Sam, a familiar figure ran up to her, limping.

Stanton Alden's face was just as ashen as his eyes, and those were leaking moisture that Magdalene suspected had nothing to do with the sting of the smoke surrounding them.

“Nox, I asked for one goddamn thing! I demanded that you keep her safe!”

Magdalene bit her lip and didn't even try to pretend her own tears were from the grime of the fire. She hadn't kept Sam safe. And if she had harbored any doubts about her earlier conclusions regarding the relationship between Alden and Sam, his glaring indifference towards the ruin before him and his sole concern for the woman who was clearly more to him than a teacher at a school he cared nothing about, would have certainly shattered any such uncertainty.

She ignored him and his labored breathing and kept watching the still-unconscious Sam on the ground. The frenzy of her pursuit of Sam and her desperation to dig her out of the rubble were replaced with concern about her

well-being, the bloody and ragged wound just below her temple, closer to the cheekbone, tearing at Magdalene's heart.

Still, Sam was breathing deeply and steadily, and the rhythmic rise and fall of her chest, heart beating strong, fluttering as butterfly wings under the skin of her neck, were all calming Magdalene's anxiety for her lover.

She had enough presence of mind to set the cat down by the stretcher, and he, perhaps sensing the gravity of the situation and already having proven his protectiveness of Sam, cuddled up to her side and hissed at Alden who had finally reached them, groaning his way up the uneven ground on unsteady legs.

Magdalene reached for Sam's face, her wounded hands smearing blood on the sooty forehead. She knew she was making a bigger mess, but she couldn't stop touching Sam. The warm skin under her fingertips reassured her Sam lived, and the image of her being buried under the stone and timber would hopefully someday be erased from Magdalene's mind.

Next to her, Alden extended his fingers, but one look from Magdalene stopped him dead in his tracks. Nobody would touch Sam without consent or permission. He balled his hands in his lap and sat there by her side, tears falling down his thin face.

"I left her..." He hiccuped and did not make any endeavor to wipe his tear-stained cheeks. "I left her as a baby on the steps of the chapel. Running for office and my Edward had just been born. And I couldn't take her..." He actually wailed and Magdalene wrinkled her nose in disgust.

"Stanton, where is Franz?"

As much as she wanted to put faith in the firefighters giving them the thumbs up before they departed, Magdalene desperately wished the doctor was here already. Franz wasn't a good man, far from it, but he was a damn good physician when all was said and done.

And she *really* didn't have any desire to hear Alden's foolish confessions. He should focus on important things, like maybe getting Sam a boat if Franz deemed that she needed to be transported urgently to the mainland.

Instead, he was a complete mess and on his way to make an even bigger one. Absolution would not come from her, and if she knew anything about Sam, there would be none, anyway. She wouldn't blame her lover. Stanton was an utterly useless man. As his face contorted into yet another sob, Magdalene noted absently that he was an ugly crier. Suited him. He was a lot of ugly things. Thankfully, Sam was nothing like him. Nothing at all.

She was about to tell him to cut out the pointless self-flagellation, that it was thirty years too late, when Sam's lips trembled and her body tensed, throat working up and down, struggling to swallow, followed by a coughing fit. Magdalene was up in a split-second, placing Sam on her side, trying to ease her discomfort and make sure she didn't choke.

Once Sam's cough subsided, Magdalene could finally make out the word that Sam kept repeating and the tears she had tried to hide sprung up again.

Sam was calling her name. She could barely speak. She had almost died and here she was, calling for her. Magdalene swallowed around the lump in her throat and placed her hand back on Sam's forehead.

"Shhh, darling, you're okay. I'm right here. I'm here."

Sam's eyes fluttered open and Magdalene wanted to sob out loud. So much love was contained in that gray light once they focused on her. A trickle of blood ran down Sam's cheek, and she lifted a hand in an attempt to wipe at it, clearly deciding that it was Magdalene who was injured, her gaze full of concern and fear.

"I'm fine, it's your blood. A part of the staircase collapsed, Sam." Magdalene's head bobbed, and a sob escaped after all. "I couldn't get to you, I had Lily and Amanda, and the splintered wood from that massive banister was so heavy and I couldn't get to you..."

She hiccuped and gulped noisily, trying but failing to suppress another sob.

"Plus, my cat was in there, so clearly I had to get the animal."

"Oh, now he's not a stray anymore, but your cat?" Sam's voice was hoarse, impacted by smoke inhalation. Magdalene looked around to see where Franz was and what was taking him so long. She would tear him to shreds the moment he got here.

When she turned back to Sam, she blinked away the tears at the love still staring up at her, and gentled her voice once again.

"He's nothing but trouble, but he led us out of that hallway, so he's the one man in this life who has a claim on my heart. Don't worry, it's your blood, you reckless creature."

As Joanne approached and chatted on and off, distracting Sam from the pain she must be feeling, Sam drifted off, and Magdalene finally wiped away her tears.

"Where the hell is Franz? Joanne? Sam needs help."

"I'll check, Magdalene, and you need to be looked after as well, those

hands are in bad shape.”

Magdalene glanced down at herself and the bleeding fingers and the abrasions on her wrist actually surprised her, she didn't feel any pain.

“Adrenaline.” Franz's voice jolted her out of her own thoughts.

“About time.” He looked warily at her, clearly afraid of her clipped tone.

“The guys said they checked on her and she was fine, so I had to look after the children... Ma'am.” It wasn't his gruff addition of the title, both reverential and fearful, that saved him from all the choice words she was biting back. Him helping the students first was all good and important but placing a firefighter's medical opinion over checking for himself didn't speak well of him. Magdalene clenched her jaw and tried to keep her face impassive. He cleaned his hands with alcohol and gave her another wary look. “Got here as soon as I could—”

“Not soon enough.” She growled and he almost shrunk away from her. God, she had no time for inefficient people. “Get to work then. She's hurt.”

“She's not the only one. I'll clean you up after I examine the patient.” He gestured at her hands, then as she stared him down, cursed under his breath, got his leather bag and did what she'd ordered him to do.

Sam opened her eyes during the examination and something must've filtered through as Alden and Franz were arguing over the course of action, words like “helicopter” and “airlifting” flying around. She tugged with surprising force on Magdalene's elbow.

“No helicopters, please, Magdalene, promise me. I'm okay, I don't want hospitals...” The pallor was not as translucent on the beloved face and fear was adding it color. It was also adding a particularly pitiful note to Sam's voice when she continued, “Please, please, I'm scared of helicopters...”

Franz pointed his light into her eyes yet again and was cursed out for his efforts. Alden looked like he was both afraid to approach too closely and would have to be dragged by dogs if anyone tried to send him away. And Magdalene, the one who was holding Sam's hand in her rather torn up ones, knew in that moment she'd give her the world. With the doctor's permission.

The next hour was a cacophony of voices and worry and Magdalene sat dazed and pained counting Sam's heartbeats. Alden and Franz argued in the background and Sam pleaded her case a few more times, adamant even in half-sleep. In the end, Franz' expertise and Sam's stubbornness prevailed. She'd be taken to the island clinic and examined again, but the doctor was

certain she was mostly fine and would need bed rest to recuperate along with some followup observation.

Later, when she finally allowed Franz to clean and bandage her hands and Sam was resting peacefully under a blanket someone had rescued from the dorms, Magdalene watched the school smolder. The firefighters were trying to put out what was left of the Viridescent wing, now that the entirety of the structure had collapsed to their level. At least they'd contained the fire from spreading to the other structures surrounding the Main Hall.

Alden, no longer crying nor breathing like a heart attack was in his immediate future, walked up to her, his hair and face dirty, full of ash and grime.

He had actually been useful, making arrangements for the girls to be taken to shore or housed on the island while waiting for their parents to arrive to take them home.

Magdalene sat motionless, holding Sam's hand, thinking that she herself had relinquished her duties with absolute ease once it was clear that everyone was safe. She almost smiled at how potential loss and death put some things into perspective. She'd striven to be Headmistress of Dragons all her life. Now she cared only for Sam's rest.

"Everything has been taken care of, Headmistress."

Maybe it was the fact that he had actually been helpful, that he'd stood up and handled things for her, or that his face lit up seeing Sam's, now clean of blood and peacefully sleeping, but something in Magdalene relented. After all, this was not her battle, and ultimately, she would do what Sam would ask of her regarding this man. For now, though, she could be magnanimous.

"I think under the circumstances, you can call me Magdalene." She pointedly looked at her own hand holding Sam's and then back at Alden.

He held her gaze for a long moment, then wearily lowered his lanky body to the ground next to her. He didn't make another attempt to touch Sam, and Magdalene was glad of it.

"And so this is it, Magdalene?" He gestured to the school with a sweep of his arm, and for a second she thought she had gleaned a strand of sadness on his face. "This is how it ends?"

She wanted to laugh. What was it about this man that always got up her dander? And yet, again, his words were what snapped Magdalene from her indecision, even if she hadn't acknowledged that she'd been faltering.

In all honesty, she simply hadn't given a second thought to Dragons. The

school had almost taken her life, moreover it had almost robbed her of something that was much more dear to her than her own existence. Dragons almost snatched Sam away from her, and as far as Magdalene was concerned, it could rest in smoldering piles of rubble for ages.

Except, here was Alden, burying the beast, throwing handfuls of dirt on its coffin as it was lowered into the grave, and Magdalene's heart was at war with itself again. Sam's fingers twitched in hers, and she knew the school was central to Sam's very being.

And dammit, as she raised her eyes to the blackened, once-white stone walls, staring at her like a charred skeleton, stripped of flesh and skin with the glare of the fires still eating at it, her heart bled for it. She loved this place. Loved it thirty years ago, loved it months ago when she'd done everything to save it from bankruptcy, and loved it now despite its murderous intent.

A line from an old quote popped in her mind, poetry and long-held grudges running into each other, blurring the almost forgotten words of the greatest Irishman.

"Things fall apart, Stanton."

He inhaled sharply next to her, and his ensuing unexpectedly hoarse chuckle jolted her. When she turned to him again, he himself seemed surprised at his laughter.

"Of all the people and all the places to be quoting Yeats's poem about the Restoration, I don't know why I didn't expect it to be you, Magdalene, nor would I have ever thought it would be here, at Dragons." He pulled a thoroughly sooty handkerchief out of his pocket, and she sensed he did it more to stall for time than to actually wipe his face. There was no telling which was dirtier anyway.

Finally, he returned his focus to her. "I guess I should stop making assumptions where you are concerned. And thank heaven for that and for you." He nodded towards Sam, clearly alluding to her efforts to save her earlier. But Magdalene was having none of this sanctimonious nonsense.

"Your heaven has been denied to me for decades, Stanton. In fact, you yourself made certain of it thirty years ago. Have you gone soft on me? Or has that same heaven suddenly become more inclusive?"

Every single accusation she had ever wanted to throw at his feet filled her mouth, scratching and clawing to get out, to be poured over him like acid, to be exorcized once and for all. But Sam's fingers were warm and safe in her

bandaged hand, all smooth, pale skin against white gauze and blood stains, and Magdalene felt weary and tired and the words seemed useless. She had wasted thirty years hating this man, thinking she hated this place. And in the end none of it mattered.

Alden opened his mouth to answer her, his fingers trembling once again, as if he was afraid she would take away the most precious thing he had. After all, she was the one holding Sam's hand. But Magdalene merely shook her head, and they sat in silence for a long moment. When he spoke his voice held a note of regret.

"I caused a lot of heartache for you, Magdalene. Are you going to make me swallow it back? You know you can. I think of all people, you are the only one who can."

He shrugged his shoulder in such familiar fashion, the corners of her mouth lifted in a sorrowful smile.

"Thirty years is a very long time, Stanton. People will condemn you to death by a thousand paper cuts for some nebulous 'greater good'. You certainly pontificated about that same good when you threw a sixteen year old to the wolves. When you closed the door on me. You carved a hole in me, a hole that she healed." She reached out and smoothed Sam's ash covered hair. "I can't say that I am grateful for the closed doors, Stanton. But you are wrong about one thing."

"And what would that be?"

"I am not the one to make you swallow the heartache."

They both watched as the first tendrils of the early morning sun parted the horizon. Sam breathed quietly in front of them, safe under the blanket.

"You know there's a reason they name storms after people, Magdalene." His smile looked sincere for once, devoid of artifice or apprehension. "Some individuals should come with warning signs, and the sulky, unrepentant teen I slammed that door on thirty years ago grew up into one of those people, one of those storms. I am sorry for that time. And I apologize for the past months. Yes, that's because I need you, and because you hold Samantha's hand. But I am still sorry. And I am very glad for your storm, Magdalene, because you saved her, and she's all I have."

With that, he got up off the ground with some difficulty and slowly made his way to where Franz huddled with some of the faculty that had chosen to remain on the ruined grounds.

Sam's fitful rest was interrupted by moments of wakefulness when she

either asked for Magdalene—and made her heart, that was shattered into tiny splinters from the pain and shock of almost losing her, slowly stitch itself back together as those hands reached for her sleepily—or hug the crying Lily, whom Magdalene wanted to both shake and engulf in her own arms.

By the time Sam woke up again, Magdalene’s fingers traveled freely along the angular planes of the beloved features. Her fingertips, encased in bandages, traced the contours of Sam’s face, her cheekbones, her nose, her brows, her forehead, as her long lashes that fanned those slightly hollowed cheeks fluttered open, and Magdalene knew right away that Sam would manage to stay awake this time.

When she spoke, her voice was still hoarse, smoke rough. “I guess I refused hospitalization?”

“In a manner of speaking, darling. Franz insisted you only have a relatively small concussion and a cut on your temple, which he stitched. Since you were so vehement about not wanting to go anywhere, he and I almost had to fight Alden on not taking you to Boston by helicopter. They’re about to move you to Franz’s clinic. He’s mostly assisting the few firefighters now, after assessing Amanda and Lily’s respective degrees of smoke inhalation, and you were resting peacefully, so there was no need to hurry anyone along.”

Sam caught the palm caressing her face and intertwined their fingers.

“Has he checked you out? You were just as exposed as everyone else.” Magdalene tsked, but Sam tugged at her hand and refused to let go until she relented and nodded.

“Yes, yes, he did. I’m fine,” Magdalene acquiesced. “How are you?”

“Ah, I think Franz was right, damn his hide.” Sam moved her shoulders experimentally, then sat up with remarkable ease without Magdalene’s assistance. Another piece of Magdalene’s heart was stitched back at the sight.

“Why was he right, darling?” Sam might have moved and looked fine, but Magdalene proceeded to assist her anyway, at least in wrapping the blanket around her shoulders. When she did, she saw Sam looking at her very closely, as if cataloging her injuries. She really was adorable.

“I thought I had hallucinated Alden’s voice earlier. Turns out I hadn’t, so clearly I’m in great shape. What is he even doing here?”

Sam huddled into the blanket, and Magdalene tucked it around her snugglier and sat down hugging her shoulder, deliberately facing away from

the fire and the ruin of the school, staring into the rising sun that spilled color and the hope of the new day over the renewed ocean. Sam stilled next to her and took a cautious look around, as if assessing who might be watching them, but Magdalene simply barreled forward.

“He arrived by private boat about an hour and a half after I called to inform him that the school was burning. He has helped in every way he can. And he didn’t step away from you for a second after you were pulled out of the rubble. He’d be here now, except they are organizing the transportation of the children to town, and I asked him to help.”

“That’s a bit weird, wouldn’t you say?”

just peered into the sunrise, and her lips thinned. She needed to address a certain issue in particular, sooner rather than later, and she wanted to be the one to do it, because with so many well-wishers around her, Sam was bound to find out about this at any moment. And all things considered, Sam was better off hearing some things from Magdalene.

“What’s weird is that Orla is still missing.”

“Do you think she’s...” It was obvious that Sam couldn’t bear to say the words.

And judging by her face, she couldn’t fathom that Fenway could be dead in the rubble of Dragons. Magdalene herself did not believe it. It was too easy a way out for Orla, and Magdalene believed the universe owed her that much; a chance to tear a strip or two off that righteous fool who’d almost gotten all four of them killed because of her obsession.

“We don’t know yet. It appears, from what Lily and Amanda told us and from what others have said, that she might not have been at the school at all. They’re looking for her now. They’ll find her, I’m sure.”

Sam’s face, so expressive, didn’t hide her apprehension. She closed her eyes, and they sat in silence for a long moment. When Sam finally returned her gaze to Magdalene, the disquietude had a different color altogether.

“You can’t embrace me like this, Magdalene. Everyone will see. You can’t—”

“Everyone has already seen plenty. Circumstances have changed, and I don’t care.” Despite Sam’s feeble attempts to put some distance between them, Magdalene only cuddled closer to her and turned her face into the warm rays of the sun.

Sam was lost in thought for a few minutes, and Magdalene could sense those tired eyes slowly roaming her countenance, as they had earlier when

they'd been scrutinizing her for injury. This time, it seemed they were looking for something else. That something else was quite easy to guess, considering Sam was one of the most selfless people Magdalene knew.

“You should care. You’ve been dreaming about this school and this job all your life.”

Magdalene just tucked a stray lock of Sam’s hair—which was currently more black than blonde—behind her ear and touched her lips to Sam’s temple, eliciting a contented sigh.

Neither of them said anything for a while, and another few minutes passed, Magdalene’s fingers tracing patterns on Sam’s back beneath the blanket. She couldn’t help but touch her. And judging by Sam’s reaction, it was fairly clear that Sam never wanted her to stop either.

However, any moment now Sam’s conscience would rear its head and her tendency to care for everyone but herself would take over. This woman really did carry the world on her shoulders, giving of herself without ever receiving anything back. Well, those times were over. Magdalene had once prioritized the school and her obsession above Sam. Seeing everything go up in smoke was an eye-opener like no other, and it also immediately set her priorities straight. Or gay, as they were.

She could see the gears turning in Sam’s mind, the eyes still assessing her face. She was probably thinking it was Magdalene who had hit her head, since to Sam’s mind, she must appear to be the one acting out-of-character.

Any minute now...

“You should care, though,” Sam repeated and tried to pull away again, only to be held even closer. Magdalene smirked at her own prescience, then just sat there, still looking at the dawn, saying nothing, allowing Sam to banish her worries before Magdalene dismissed them.

Sam did not disappoint. Magdalene bit her lip and let her forge ahead with her speech.

“I mean, I understand that you probably got scared by the staircase and that may have traumatized you, and you’re acting as if I might have died, but I’m okay.” Magdalene turned to face her fully, and whatever Sam saw in her eyes made her mouth fall open. Good, she did not know how to express that the words ‘Sam’ and ‘died’ in one sentence would never not choke the life out of her.

She let Sam continue, sensing she was almost finished.

“Look, this isn’t a romance novel. It’s not like you are the tormented

heroine who suddenly realizes her lover could have perished and that triggers a massive revelation that she needs to abandon her dream and throw her life's work away simply to somehow make a grand gesture to said lover."

Sam stared at her, clearly lost as to what to expect next, but Magdalene leaning in and firmly kissing her on the mouth wasn't it. After all, they were in full view of the whole school and a trustee, people milling about all around them. By Sam's logic, they were caught red-handed. Magdalene wanted to shout from the rooftops. For the first time in her life she was flooded with the sensation of her heart occupying the entire chest, filling it the way it had always been meant to. It felt right, it felt glorious.

"Sam Threadneedle, have you been reading lesbian romance, you adorable darling?" She ran a fingertip over Sam's lips, a charge going out from the silky skin under her finger all the way to her shoulder like electricity. God, she was so in love. It was such a delight. *Sam* was such a delight, her one and only, all shocked, wide eyes and delectable mouth, opened slightly in something akin to outrage.

"That is not the point, and also stop looking at me like that!" Her aforementioned delight obviously still had not gotten the message. Magdalene raised a perfectly groomed eyebrow, but Sam barreled on, clearly desperate to quell whatever river was overflowing inside her lover and causing her to act so out-of-character. "We agreed. We had a deal. You love the school. You need the school. This is your life."

Magdalene just looked at her, filling her gaze with all the affection and all the love she held—all the devotion she felt would spill out at any moment, all the affection she wanted to cover Sam with and never, ever stop. It was time.

"I do love the school. I love you more." Sam's eyes glazed over, and she slowly shook her head as if trying to clear it, as if trying to figure out whether she'd heard her right. It cracked Magdalene's heart a little to see Sam struggle to believe her, to see Sam unable to fully realize just how absolutely amazing she was. Well, Magdalene would make it her life's mission to show her every day that she was the love of said life. She would start right now.

"When I watched the banister collapse on top of you and then dug to reach you, all I thought was that I had not said it back. You know, you told me on the cliffs as you were drawing those ridiculous chalk hearts, and I felt it was unfair of me to say it right then and there when we couldn't be together in the open. So I didn't tell you, and I thought we had all the time in the world. And then you go and save my cat and get hit in the head by a chunk of

centennial oak... I love you. Yes, this school is my life. You are also my life. I am not having some sort of romance-novel-crisis precipitated by my lover having a near-death experience. I am simply saying that I love you. And I will fight for you and for the school, and maybe—since you followed me into fire—you will fight by my side.”

With Sam still speechless and entirely shocked, blinking at her happily, Magdalene proceeded with another tender application of lips to the temple where bandages held swollen, torn skin. She then opened her arms and held Sam to her, the last pieces of flesh over her thirty-year-old wound threading over and holding her chest tightly and whole now. Sam breathed in deeply and nestled in that very place where Magdalene had once bled the dark ichor of vengeance that had clouded her entire life with resentment and obsession with this school, with revenge. It all seemed so foolish now. So silly.

Magdalene had found herself, she had found her life’s purpose in the arms of a woman who held her heart and on the grounds that held her affection, and she would make sure she’d keep them both safe.

Sam’s lips moved at her neck and Magdalene smiled, her eyes filling with tears of true happiness as she inhaled the fall air, mingling with a hint of lily-of-the-valley as the sun rose majestically over the ocean.

OF DESTRUCTION AFTERMATHS & TAMED ICE QUEENS

The aftermath of destruction is either abandon or reconstruction. And underneath the surface of everything, it's grief.

Stanton Alden's millions would ensure the reconstruction. The revelation of his relationship with Sam would make those millions sustainable. As long as Sam was at Dragons, he would pour his gold over the cracks of their wretched history, trying to buy his absolution.

But Alden's money could not paper over the grief Magdalene carried around her neck these days. The clean-up had started. The plans were being drawn to rebuild in the exact image of the original school. The public opinion had swung 180 degrees in its support of her leadership.

She leaned against the once-white wall of the former Aula Magna. The largest auditorium, which once had the capacity to fit over 300 students and faculty, was gutted. The skeleton of walls, the occasional tendon of torn and burnt electric, the excoriated pipes like drenched blood vessels were all that was left.

Magdalene closed her eyes and allowed herself to listen to the silence of the now-quieted down construction site. The laborers were gone for the day, and only the sound of the forest behind the school and the ocean beneath it were discernible. The cold stone at her back seemed to imprint itself through her blouse onto her skin, and she allowed the vast emptiness to wash over her.

Sam was waiting for her in her new room. And Magdalene realized that, amidst the destruction, she was smiling. In the middle of ruin, her heart, while grieving for the beloved Dragons, was full. And wasn't that a miracle in itself?

Her mother had called the morning after the fire. Magdalene had been in Franz's clinic as Alden asked her to give him and Sam some time alone. She'd sat on a rickety chair, her phone battery almost empty, foot bouncing, thoughts very much with Sam, as she swiped the screen to answer. Before she said hello to her mother, Candace informed her that she was on her way to the island, and only Magdalene's immediate and vehement insistence that she not come, that the island really couldn't accommodate her, prompted a pause.

"To be fair to that speck of dirt in the middle of nowhere, my girl, even before it went up in flames, it couldn't accommodate me to my standards. No wonder it was incinerated."

Magdalene found herself laughing at her mother's candor. A glance through the window and towards the cliffs, at the work being done to Viridescent Tower, and she could almost envision the hotel that would soon rise to meet Candace's exacting requirements. That would mean her mother would visit. Magdalene shuddered and decided to move the conversation along.

"The island stands, mother. The school burned."

"It really doesn't matter to me." She could hear the eye roll in Candace's tone. "I assume you are staying put?"

The question was nonchalant enough to require nothing but a simple answer, except something in her mother's voice made Magdalene sit up straighter.

"You assume correctly, mother." She laid the words down carefully, as if they might explode in front of her.

There was a loud exhalation on the other end of the line, then the pause stretched uncomfortably long.

"Mom?"

"I should have named you Jude or Rita. Both of those are patron saints of lost causes, my girl." Candace's words were filled with so much impatience, Magdalene had to bite back her chuckle.

"I can't in good conscience walk away, mother."

"Walk away in bad conscience then, Magdalene. Who gives a damn? You nearly died and for what? A chunk of land? A few stones? A revenge plotted for three decades? You scared me!"

The exasperation grew into concern, and Magdalene could tell Candace was on the verge of tears.

"Mom..."

“Do not ‘mom’ me, Magdalene! How am I supposed to have time to atone for being a self-absorbed creature when you are dead?”

Magdalene’s mouth dropped open.

“I wasn’t aware you were trying to atone, mother.”

A loud tsk followed by a sigh were the only response, and for a moment, they sat in silence, the reception space slowly filling with people giving Magdalene curious glances. In the adjacent exam room, Magdalene could hear Alden’s unsteady voice explaining to Sam that he was her father, and that he’d abandoned her thirty years ago.

Her eyes stung, and she thought about how hurt and confused Sam must be. These revelations were never easy, and her heart went out to her lover. She knew she couldn’t take this hit for Sam, but Magdalene really wished she’d at least been able to hold her hand as the blow was being delivered.

The parallels of their situations, Sam’s father, her mother, were uncanny, and the synchronicity of these come-to-Jesus conversations were not lost on Magdalene.

“I assume Stanton will fund the rebuild?” Clearly done with the heart-to-heart, Candace was all business now.

“How did you—,” Magdalene cut herself off. Why was she asking things that had no explanation other than that this was her mother and she knew everything? “Yes, should all the stars align, he will pay for the reconstruction.”

Candace’s chuckle on the other end of the line was mirthless.

“Stars? You mean if his daughter doesn’t throw him off those cliffs for what he did to her, the absolute brute?” Again, Magdalene marveled at the depth of her mother’s knowledge. Then she marveled at herself for marveling in the first place. Gossip was Candace’s stock-in-trade, after all.

“Mother—” She was weary. The events of the night, the exhaustion, the fear and adrenaline leaving her bone-tired. She really didn’t want to entertain her mother’s curiosity.

“You know, I thought you’d made a once-in-a-lifetime match with Nox. Rich, the bloodline alone was to die for. And yet, here you are beating that one quite easily. Daughter-in-law to the Governor of Massachusetts.” Magdalene was floored. The playful lilt in her mother’s words was palpable.

“Former...” was all she could muster in reply.

“I wouldn’t discount him just yet, my girl.” The mischief remained, and Magdalene rolled her eyes at her mother’s power hungry ways. Candace and

her network of busybody ladies of high society, with their money and their information, could yet make Alden governor again, solely because Candace wanted to see Magdalene close to some political ambition. Leave it to her mother to turn a tragedy into a personal victory.

Perhaps that would be the reason she would never truly reconcile with Candace. And *reconciliation* was entirely the wrong word to describe her feelings for her mother. Forgiveness wasn't an option since Candace would never repent for her behavior where her daughter was concerned, and all Magdalene had left was to accept her mother as she was. No matter how much Candace planned to atone. And speaking of...

"Atonement, mother? Are you planning on laying bricks at Dragons?"

Candace's scoff was all disgust.

"I am getting married in three weeks, Magdalene. Don't be ridiculous. I will come see you after the honeymoon. And I mean a 'moon', dear. We are going to Europe for a month. My wardrobe needs to be updated."

Well, this was news to Magdalene.

"Am I even invited to the wedding?"

An embarrassed sort of silence was her answer. She laughed out loud and kept laughing, as her mother tried to make her stop.

"Magdalene! You have to understand, I can't pretend to be fifty when my child is forty-six, even if you don't look a year older than forty. And I have not told him how old I am! Let me enjoy this, and I will start on that atonement thing after everything is finalized and we're back home. Plus, you hate my weddings and declined to come to the last three, anyway."

That much was true.

"Mother, why are you doing this?"

"Sue me, Magdalene. I love weddings and being the center of attention. And I look amazing in ivory."

Well, Candace would be Candace, no matter what, and Magdalene knew better than to blame the sun for shining. It was precisely what it was there for. At least she was absolutely self-aware, and unrepentantly so.

DAYS LATER, the phone call still made her laugh. Amidst the thoughts of her mother, the silence of the skeletal Dragons suddenly broke under a pair of Ferragamo loafers. Magdalene would know those steps anywhere. The careful-not-to-get-my-expensive-shoes-dirty ones.

For a moment, she considered remaining motionless so he wouldn't find her in the dusk and the rubble.

She must have conjured him up, remembering the conversation with her mother and how she'd compared Magdalene's new relationship with her marriage. It was very much reminiscent of the first day of school months ago and of how these things seemed to come to her in twos.

"There's no way George told you where to find me, Timothy."

The surprised jerking of his shoulders—clearly he had not expected her to be leaning against the wall in the deserted Aula Magna—gave her a small amount of satisfaction.

"She didn't. I think she'd just as soon send me jumping off the cliff rather than be helpful. I thought I'd find you somewhere around here, is all. Sam actually mentioned..."

He trailed off, rubbing his neck. Ah, so he had the decency to be uncomfortable at ratting out Sam. It was Magdalene's turn to be surprised. At both, the fact that Sam knew about her sunset wanderings over the carcass of the school, and that she would share this information with Timothy.

"It's fine. You're free to talk to her, you know."

He came closer, and in the dying light of dusk she could see apprehension on his face, mixed with regret. She almost sighed. So this would be that kind of conversation yet again.

"Timothy..."

Her shoulders hunched as she tried to shield herself from his demagoguery as much as possible.

"No, no." He raised his hands, palms facing her, defeated. "I won't start. I know everything you are going to reply."

"I will say what I have been saying for years. There is no other way for me to end this more than this is already over."

His answering smile was self-deprecating.

"I am not here for that. I just wanted to see for myself that you are alright, and since Alden is here, I planned on speaking to him as well. Insurance issues."

She raised an eyebrow at him, and he chuckled.

"Fine, and I did want to see Sam, too. Maybe to finally understand what you see in her, and what it is that made you run into a burning building to save her. I suspect you'd not have poured a glass of water on me, had I been on fire."

The lack of resentment in his voice was the only reason she entertained the idea of explaining herself.

“Remember how you threw in my face that I was unknowable?”

He had the good grace to look sheepish.

“I said many things back then. I was hurt, Magdalene.”

“Humor me. Do you still think so?” He took a little too long to shake his head, and she smiled at him sadly.

“No... Magdalene...” He shuffled his feet and looked away. She patiently waited for him to continue. The chill of the stone at her back was an unexpected comfort. “I just always felt that no matter how deeply I knew you, I never quite spoke your language.”

He shrugged and stuffed his hands in his pockets, obviously expecting to be upbraided.

Magdalene pushed off the wall and took a few steps away from him along the little path through the debris that the laborers had cleared to allow them to easily leave the dilapidated structure in the direction of the new faculty quarters. Halfway towards the gap in the bricks that now served as an exit, she turned to him, and they stared at each other.

Magdalene knew that, no matter how many times they had said goodbye to each other before, this was their actual farewell.

“Sam...” His eyes narrowed in anger or curiosity. She didn’t know, nor did she care anymore. It was freeing to be totally absolved of guilt and worry about other people’s feelings. This one person’s feelings in particular. “Sam speaks that language, Timothy. She always did. And it’s as simple as that.”

She left him among the rubble and the destruction and made her way towards the one who understood her.

AS SHE CLIMBED to the third floor of the makeshift dormitory, she felt the weariness of the day lift. In the aftermath of the fire, only the seniors in their majority had decided to remain and graduate Dragons. All of them, along with the faculty required to ensure said graduation, were now squeezed into the former science building, where there were just enough rooms to accommodate everyone. The rest of the students, they’d said goodbye to.

Magdalene could feel her heart squeeze painfully in her chest from when

she'd helped the middle-schoolers to the ferry. She'd tried to speak to every one of them, shake all the hands, wish them well. And then at the very end, as the ferry signaled its imminent departure, a slim figure broke away from the gaggle on the deck and ran ashore, only to give Magdalene a massive hug which was much stronger than the willowy arms appeared to be able to bestow.

"I'll never forget you, Headmistress!" The girl whispered with such vehemence, it made Magdalene's lips quirk. Shouts of "Audrey! Audrey! The ferry is leaving!" made the girl jump back on deck. She was beet-red, and yet the eyes were resolute and unrepentant. Magdalene waved and covered her laughter with a cough.

"In about fifteen years, some woman will have a troublemaker on her hands, Maggie." George's voice only made Magdalene laugh harder.

"it will be an older woman at that. I'll bet my last dollar. Hurricane Audrey Avens will do some damage, mark my words."

However, despite the hugs and the sweet farewells, Magdalene's heart had been heavy.

Except as her steps led her to the door of what she now thought of as her and Sam's apartment, the smile that returned to her face was fond and a little dreamy. How had it happened, that amidst all the danger and near-death experiences, here they were, together at last, alone to enjoy each other?

As she cracked open the door, she realized that their alone time would have to wait a bit. Sam's self-appointed entertainer—since the title of protector was taken by Willoughby, who did not leave her side—Lily Easterly was indeed doing her absolute best to lift Sam's rather bored, and thus drowning in self-pity, spirits.

Magdalene entered quietly and leaned against the doorjamb, observing the scene in front of her. Sam, dispirited and frustrated at her laid out state, but smiling affectionately at Lily, was in bed with Willoughby on her chest, as Lily sat in the chair next to her, *The Light Princess* opened in her hands.

"...teach, this fairytale stuff is kinda cool. Like, I can totally see you being the prince. 'Cause you're a klutz and nerdy, but you got the full-on heroic vibe going. Charge into burning buildings to save the princess."

Magdalene bit her lip to stop herself from making a sound of affection that was trying to escape her chest, so full of love and joy.

"Lils, with all due respect, you and Amanda are totally princesses, but you are so not my princesses."

“Well, duh! Cause Hottie McHot—”

Well, she would never have a better moment than this one. Leaning on the doorframe, she let her presence be known.

“That’s Headmistress McHot to you, Ms. Easterly.” Magdalene deliberately softened her voice so as to not scare either of them, but both Lily and Sam jumped about a foot in the air at the interruption.

“Ah, what are you doing here, Headmistress?” Magdalene was tempted to bang her head against the wall at Sam trying to act like she had no idea what was happening.

They’d had this conversation every day since the fire. Magdalene was tired of pretending, tired of hiding, and thoroughly done with the opinions of other people. With Alden threatening to go to open war with Tullinger and Rolffe over the plans for the school and her continued role as Headmistress, her position was more secure than ever. And if it weren’t... Magdalene didn’t much care. If the choice was between being with Sam or being Headmistress, she’d resign first thing in the morning.

It was that simple to her. It was, however, not simple to Sam at all, whose big heart ached for everything and everyone except herself, and Magdalene, while admiring her selfless quality, at times wanted to smother her lover with kisses. Which, she realized, would not be punishment enough. It was rather endearing, yet infuriating how stubborn Sam was being in her altruism.

“I’m here to retire for the night, darling. Any objections?” She deliberately lowered her voice to the most sultry register she could muster in front of people without sounding lewd and winked at Sam.

Lily watched with wide eyes, then rose to extend a high five to Sam, who obviously answered it mostly on instinct.

“You are my hero, teach. Absolute legend! Way to go! Happy for you. From a nerd to a heroic romantic lead who melts the Ice Queen. That’s such a trip.”

Sam and Magdalene exchanged amused glances before Magdalene chuckled out loud.

“With Sam as your mentor, is it a surprise you, too, are a fan of lesbian romance?”

Lily was no longer easily cowed, no matter how haughty a look Magdalene sent her way. There was no need for any such glare, but Magdalene wanted it to be known that this was the new reality and that she was not only unashamed, but she was proud and she would do as she pleased

when it came to her personal life.

Lily kept glancing from the headmistress to her math teacher in something akin to awe until she had finally made whatever decision that had been preoccupying her mind and offered her fist to Magdalene for a bump.

“Congratulations, ma’am. You got yourself a real one. Maybe a bit dim, all things considered, cause it took me years to let her know that skinny jeans, Converse and flannel are a huge waving flag of queerdom.”

Both Magdalene and Lily laughed, distracting Sam from whatever thoughts she was lost in.

“Wha...”

“Ha, eloquent as always, teach. Which makes this whole thing an even bigger character development arc. ‘Cause you obviously have to have some moves and some mad skills to get the Ice Queen, but she still falls for a total geek like this. My point was that I confess to being a lesbic reader, but for anyone to know a classic trope like Ice Queen, they have to be familiar with the genre themselves. So Headmistress, admit it!”

Magdalene just chuckled at the girl’s antics.

“I plead the fifth.”

Magdalene slowly made her way towards the bed where Sam was lying, stroking Willoughby’s fur, and looking at her closely. Something in those eyes was so warm, so full of love, yet so sad, and Magdalene wanted to erase the sorrow forever and fill that gaze only with the same joy she herself was feeling. She knew Sam was processing the events at Dragons—the fire and its aftermath, including the revelations about her father—at her own pace, and she would catch up to Magdalene’s happiness in due time. She’d wait for her for as long as Sam needed for the melancholy to bleed itself out.

From the doorway, Lily’s voice sounded rather wicked with suggestion.

“Yeah, I think under the circumstances my offer to sleep in the corner armchair is not such a good idea. You seem to have it under control, Headmistress, even if this one doesn’t.”

Sam feigned outrage, but she didn’t quite pull it off.

“Skedaddle, pipsqueak.”

“And there she goes, the romantic hero, in a bout of sexual frustration resorting to insults!” Lily theatrically clutched at her shirt, and with one final peal of laughter and a quick hug for the convalescent Sam, made her exit.

Magdalene gave Willoughby a deliberate scratch, and he understood her without the need for her to snap her fingers, simply bumping his head into

Sam's chest in a gesture Magdalene had come to recognize as either hello or goodbye and trotted towards his pillow at the foot of the bed.

"Are you sexually frustrated, darling?"

Magdalene knew she was playing rather dirty, pouring bourbon over gravel in her tone, but Sam's sadness needed to at least be eased temporarily.

"That should be illegal, Headmistress."

"What should, Professor?" Her fingers still covered in bandages, she made slow but steady work of the many buttons on the front of her Oxford shirt. When she undid the cuff on her left wrist and revealed the strips of gauze there, she sent a silent thank you to her mother and to the craftsmanship of the Vacheron-Constantin watchmakers, because she owed them her left hand and therefore a debt of gratitude. Instead of dealing with a crushed appendage, all she had to show for her brush with a granite slab were a few deeper cuts from the watch's metal, which had ensured her limb remained largely intact.

To distract herself from painful thoughts and to keep her lover on edge, since that seemed to do the trick in regards to that melancholy of hers, she continued her game with Sam.

"My voice?" Magdalene moved closer, placing a knee on the bed. As she leaned forward, the sides of her shirt hung limply, revealing the only lacy ivory bra she had left in her currently meager wardrobe. Sam's throat worked up and down in such a clear display of lust, Magdalene's mouth went dry. Yet there was more of this to play out.

"My lingerie?" She knew that the pencil skirt, with its little slits that showed nothing. Yet she was also aware it drove Sam to distraction. And as it was riding up right now, revealing dark gray thigh highs, Sam tried to moisten her lips with no notable success. Seeing the effect she had on her beloved was entirely too much.

Belatedly, Magdalene realized she had been trying to entice Sam, and she'd ended up fully enraptured herself.

"My kisses?" She allowed herself a moment of simple pleasure, of letting her lips capture Sam's, of getting lost in the already familiar yet so new sensations of skin sliding on skin, on tongues touching and retreating, of seduction and surrender all in one long sensuous kiss.

"You make me weak." It was obvious that Sam wasn't aware she'd spoken out loud as the kiss ended, because she blinked and whimpered. Magdalene just looked at her, raising an eyebrow in challenge and took off

her unbuttoned shirt, then wiggled out of her skirt. Sam watched as if mesmerized as the thigh highs were revealed, then choked and coughed. Magdalene smirked.

This being what it was, she half turned away from Sam and began to roll the stockings off her legs, one after the other, then pulled on a rather large, misshapen hoodie. She tried to be as inconspicuous as possible, not wanting Sam to recognize the garment. It was, after all, her Boston College sweatshirt, worn and rather ratty, but without a doubt beloved, since Sam had been searching for it high and low after it mysteriously had gone missing after their Connecticut trip.

“Not to sound particularly like an idiot right now, but what’s happening?” Sam’s facial expression mirrored her earlier, uncomprehending one, and Magdalene couldn’t help but smile. She had teased her lover too much tonight.

“I can’t seem to keep my hands or mouth to myself where you’re concerned, Sam. And you’re injured. You need rest. I apologize for my earlier less-than-noble intentions.”

Sam’s pout was touching as Magdalene chuckled and moved around the room to tidy up various odds and ends and prepare her own clothes for tomorrow. Considering what was left of her possessions, she’d need a trip to the mainland posthaste. How was a woman supposed to live in a single pair of Louboutins?

When she finally turned back, Sam’s pout had grown rather comical. Magdalene kissed her on the nose, thoroughly charmed by her ridiculousness, and proceeded to the bathroom to remove what little makeup she was wearing.

Examining her face in the mirror as she cleaned it and applied moisturizer, her fingers running under her eyes, to the beginnings of crow’s feet and then up and down her neck, she cataloged the recent changes time had inflicted there. Candace had always said the neck was the first place to show signs of aging. Would Sam notice? Would Sam care?

Hair pulled back, in Sam’s gray hoodie and a pair of boxer shorts, Magdalene emerged from the bathroom and decided she was being absurd. Sam wouldn’t notice and Sam wouldn’t care. Neither about her wrinkles, nor her neck, or really anything, if her current reaction was to go by.

Pout completely abandoned, Sam gaped. Magdalene’s knees went a little weak and she choked up on her own vulnerability and on being so in love. It

was ridiculous just how deeply in love.

“These are comfortable to sleep in, Sam. Stop staring, it’s not polite.”

She softened her rebuke by climbing into bed beside Sam and spooning her closely. She felt more than heard Sam grumble.

“This is just wrong. I’m the big spoon.”

“Sure, darling. But right now you’re the injured spoon.” Magdalene snuggled closer and snaked her hand along Sam’s abdomen. Sam threaded their fingers together, touching the band-aids covering Magdalene’s digits and wrist. She held her breath as Sam raised the injured hand to her mouth and placed gentle kisses on each wound.

“You’re injured too.”

Magdalene inhaled sharply to keep the tears at bay.

“Nonsense. Sir Willoughby is far worse than I am, and he’s already back to full speed.” She snuggled closer and felt a shiver run down her lover’s spine.

“His full speed isn’t exactly an indicator. He’s not all that quick.”

“How dare you?” Amused but very much in character, Magdalene leaned closer and bit Sam’s earlobe none too gently. The shivers intensified.

Excellent.

“He already got into a fight with some tom who dared come up from town to inspect all the kerfuffle. Our boy staunchly defended his territory. And here you are bad-mouthing him.”

Sam laughed, and they laid in silence for a longer moment until suddenly, Magdalene felt a tug on her top’s gray, ragged sleeve.

“I remember this...”

Magdalene scoffed and made a half-hearted attempt to pull her arm away, but Sam held on, impeding her retreat.

“I have no idea what you could possibly mean.” Magdalene tried for feigned indifference.

“You thief, this is my hoodie. I thought I lost it in Connecticut or something. And you stole it!” Since Sam was still gently holding her hand, it was clear that the outrage in her tone was exaggerated.

“I didn’t steal it. I chose to take it. Call it appropriate distribution of resources. You don’t treat your clothes well, anyway. Before it all burned down, half your things couldn’t even be called clothing anymore, maybe a ragged collection of threads.”

Sam’s shoulder shook as she obviously tried not to laugh, playing the

injured party.

“Ah, so you were saving my hoodie from myself?”

And now it was Magdalene who lost her fight with the giggles that had been trying to surface ever since Sam had mentioned the sweatshirt, and she let out a delighted peel of laughter. Sam joined in, holding her snugly.

“Speaking of saving. How do you even have it? We lost almost everything in the fire. I barely got my wallet and laptop out as we evacuated the dorms.”

Magdalene sighed, warmth and contentment spreading across her limbs, and placed her cheek on Sam’s back, smelling detergent, remnants of smoke—which were all over the place these days—and just Sam, that scent that she’d recognize everywhere.

“It was Willoughby. As we were running around the dormitories, checking that all faculty were implementing the evacuation plan, he must’ve dragged this out of my apartment and was quite comfortably laying on it in the middle of the quad, waiting for me to finish. You know how he detests sleeping on hard surfaces.”

She lifted herself on one elbow and saw Sam smile at her story. When her face relaxed in amusement, her tired eyes began to droop, slumber overtaking her. Magdalene sighed again as Sam unsuccessfully tried to mask a yawn. She laid her head down against Sam’s back, feeling her breathe, safe and steady.

“At least I got to take the important stuff out of my room,” Sam mumbled, succumbing to sleep.

As her lover drifted off, Magdalene softly whispered her confession, “So did Willoughby,” before placing a gentle kiss on Sam’s neck.

OF THE WOLF AT THE DOOR & BURNING MADNESS

With the eventful past few weeks, Magdalene had perhaps foolishly forgotten the essential truth about her own life. Nothing lasted. Especially silences. She had always been afraid of them. No matter how seemingly peaceful they were, her entire life silences felt like the calm before the storm. As if fate was loading its ammunition. Or digging a deeper hole.

Nonetheless, she had indeed been enjoying the quiet, albeit interrupted by the noise of an active demolition and construction site and by Sam's soft breathing by her side at night. She had also been too busy to remember that this wasn't in fact her life. That Magdalene Nox had no easy silences and no lasting peace. The wolf was always at her door.

He'd lured her into this state of peaceful joy, Sam's scent, full of lily of the valley and woman, acting as the ultimate lullaby. But he'd been right there all along, and he was ready to tear out her heart. The one that Sam had finished mended. After all, he had been after that heart for so long. Or she, as it ultimately turned out...

Magdalene wasn't even surprised. Not really. When Sam and Orla and Joanne busted into her office to reveal who the culprit behind the attic fire was, Magdalene took one look at George, and the puzzle pieces clicked into place, the bits of cardboard making that satisfying sound of fitting right in, all she could think was, 'yes, of course...'

Despite the stillness that reigned in the small room as Orla and Joanne filed out to follow Magdalene's instructions to summon Sheriff Green to the island, it thundered like the distant roar of a fast approaching storm.

Magdalene sat behind her desk in the workspace that had been set up for her in the only building left standing after the fire. Her hands folded on the

shining new wooden desktop, she knew she appeared calm, but underneath it, underneath the quietude, that approaching storm was her own wrath. Her own rage.

She thought that if only she allowed it to snap, to find a crack, a vulnerability in her tightly welded armor, she would tear George to shreds and let all that blood, all that poison that had nearly ruined Magdalene's life, drip down her fingertips and fall on the centuries-old floors that came so close to also being destroyed in the flames that this woman had unleashed.

The image of crimson on her pale hands still carrying the scars and bandages was so vivid and so seductive, Magdalene almost shuddered. But she did not take her eyes off George, who was silence itself.

Peripherally, Magdalene could hear Sam's breathing, the sound piercing in the room's eeriness yet vital to Magdalene's sanity, because it broke that sheer stillness and anchored her in reality, in the moment, in the right now, and not in the years of terror and stalking, not in the months of horrid phone calls which only stopped once they moved here and disturbing letters; not in the decades of rumors and whispers and not in the minutes of horror of being burned alive.

No, Magdalene was grateful for Sam and to Sam. Because for all her own vaunted intelligence, she had never once suspected that the person who was hunting her was George, her best and at times only friend.

And so she sat unmoving and looked at George, breathing deeply since this was to be a difficult conversation, a painful one, and she needed to have all her wits about her—and not merely the ones that wanted to strike and claw.

George, in turn, was not looking at anyone in particular, her stare shifting restlessly from one object to the next, to the next, as if seeking purchase and not finding it.

Magdalene felt no sympathy. In fact, underneath the fire of anger, she felt nothing at all, a curious state of being, considering what was happening. Everything was falling apart, and nothing would ever be the same.

I trusted you...

The stillness stretched, filling the moments, first with an uncomfortable sort of disquietude, then slowly transitioning into downright untenable tension. Time felt viscous, like slime, slithering all over the floor as Sam's breathing continued to be the only sound permeating the room. And then, when said tension was about to snap like a twig, George's subdued voice

broke the greasy detente.

“I could never outmaneuver you with silence, Maggie. You use it so masterfully. At times like a shield. Other times—like now—as a sword. And I could never win these games against you. I sure do enjoy playing though. I really do.”

And then George did move, hands flying to her own face, to her neck, touching and wiping and trembling. Yet Magdalene didn't flinch, didn't speak, merely looked on, knowing that her wordless stance pushed George onward to whatever brink she was sure to be headed towards. Under her desk, Magdalene keyed the voice recorder on her phone.

Either George saw her move that tiny bit, or Magdalene's silence finally got to her, but suddenly, she was up on her feet, and her voice was full of abject despair.

“Maggie, say something.” For a moment, George kept wringing her hands, fingers trembling, before darting towards her, as did Sam, stepping between them. Magdalene's heart wanted to bundle Sam up and take her somewhere safe and warm and comfortable, because she was so hurt. Just days ago Magdalene had almost lost her. And Sam was still limping a bit and clearly dizzy, because her gait was uneven, yet here she was, literally standing in front of Magdalene. If she hadn't been so thoroughly in love already, she'd have fallen then and there.

The contrast could not have been more stark. Sam, lightheaded and unsteady, yet resolute, shoulders set and eyes blazing—and George, shaking and blubbering, lips trembling and cheeks wet. It wasn't a fair comparison, since nobody could hold a candle to Sam anyway, but Magdalene didn't care to be fair. Not then. She could still smell the blood she'd envisioned, and her rage had still not been sated.

She suspected it never would be. The treachery was too deep and too painful. But the least she could do was find out everything, even if she didn't particularly care to know in that moment.

George laughed then, the sound, same as nails on a chalkboard scratching Magdalene's very soul. She wanted it all to stop. She also wanted the truth. And then she only would want Sam, because Magdalene knew that when all was said and done, nobody but Sam could put her back together.

“You are such a guard dog, Sammy.” George spat the name, as if it was foul in her mouth, and all things considered, you would have to hate someone this much to want to burn them alive. Magdalene saw Sam fight the urge to

wipe her face. She didn't give George the satisfaction though, just stood there silently, and Magdalene felt both pride and protectiveness.

"Maggie, call off your dog. It's not like I'd do anything to you! You know I'd never hurt you." George's voice cracked again, and the phrase sounded more like a plea instead of whatever aggravation she'd meant to convey.

It was Magdalene's turn to speak, and she prayed her own voice would hold. That it would do what she needed it to do, instead of rise into a hysterical scream of vengeance and pain.

"Could've fooled me, George." She sensed more than heard her words come out in the exact manner she had wanted them to, too distracted by the effort it took to speak.

Like a landmine that had been stepped on and was poised to explode at any second, the words lay there, awaiting the immediate aftermath of the hurt they had inflicted. Flesh and bones would start flying out of the explosive meat grinder at any moment. And Magdalene saw the exact second it happened. George's face became pure agony.

"Maggie... I never wanted to hurt you." George's throat worked as she repeated the wretched phrase that was so far from the truth. She licked her lips, but Magdalene could see the attempt was futile as the foul smell of dehydration reached her senses. She wanted to gag, to turn away from George. Yet, she couldn't. She owed herself that much. The full story. And Magdalene owed it to Sam as well. After all, she had figured it all out.

When she had staggered through the doorway a few minutes ago and pointed at Willoughby, who regarded the entire kerfuffle as if it was all beneath him, the threads had come together in Magdalene's mind as well. Her cat only accepted two people, and one of them was already inside the attic. Which meant it had to have been the other locking the door.

Sam's brilliant mind had saved the day yet again. And she was here now, probably having drafted both the disgraced Orla and the ever-supportive Joanne into marching down to Magdalene's office to unmask George. Her Sam was literally standing between her and an attempted murderer, and she deserved to hear everything.

Magdalene's nails bit into her palm as she spoke again. "Could've fooled me, George."

The repetition seemed to do the trick. George's lips twitched, and it was as if a little, tiny gear broke inside a complex mechanism. Because along with

the foul breath, the truth started to pour out of George's mouth.

"I've loved you for years, Maggie. Twenty years is too long a time to love someone and for that someone to never know. To never care."

The wretched dam had broken, and despite her obvious earlier resolve, Sam suddenly looked like she wanted nothing more than to leave this room and not be exposed to the story that was about to unfold. Magdalene didn't blame her. She told herself that she really couldn't complain if Sam left the office, but her lover just re-planted her unsteady feet and listened on.

The backs of Magdalene's eyes stung with unshed tears. Yet she remained motionless, not looking at either Sam or George, counting her own breaths, and willing George to get on with it. Followed by wishing for George to never speak ever again, because the hairs on the back of her neck stood up when her secretary opened her mouth once more.

"You walked through the door at Rodante twenty years ago, and nothing about me was ever the same, Maggie. You were everything I'd ever wanted. I ended the sorry excuse of a relationship I was wallowing in the very next day. I knew that, from that moment on, there would be nobody else for me. Nobody."

George paced back and forth, before sitting down, eyes drinking Magdalene in with a sick sort of adulation that made her skin crawl. How had she never noticed this before? How had she never paid attention? After all, she prided herself on her ability to truly see and know people.

Well, Reverend Sanderson, may he rest in anything but peace, had been right about one thing: *Pride cometh before the fall...*

"You were so... unattainable. Like a goddess. Nobody and nothing could touch you, and I felt like a mere mortal to be in your presence, to drink in your light. All those people were just basking in your light and never knew what kind of blessing was being bestowed upon them. I was the only one who saw..."

A sob escaped George, and if it hadn't seemed possible that Sam might look more uncomfortable, she did now. Yet Magdalene continued to sit completely motionless, but underneath the anger, something stirred in her, and she was horrified to recognize it for the most absurd emotion she could conjure at this moment. Pity. She balled her hands, knuckles white, trying to keep the sensation from taking over, but it was unmistakable and unstoppable. She felt *pity*.

God, why this? Why now?

And amidst Magdalene's emotional pendulum swing, George continued.

"I was the only one who knew, and you never even looked at me. Never noticed me. I became your secretary when you were promoted to Faculty Chair and moved on with you when you became Deputy Headmistress. I would have followed you to the ends of the Earth. Do you even care? Do you?"

The outburst was so unexpected that Sam flinched, yet Magdalene stilled herself further and continued to stare ahead, nauseous and heartbroken. There was sure to be more to come, after all.

"You never realized, did you? You never knew that I loved you beyond words, beyond reason. You chose all the wrong people. All these men who could never in a million years appreciate you, appreciate your true worth, worship you like you are meant to be worshiped."

George dropped her face into her palms for a second, but raised it back up quickly, as if she was afraid to miss even a moment of looking at her. Magdalene's skin continued to crawl under those greedy eyes, and she suppressed a shudder of disgust. Her nausea was getting worse, she'd gag any minute.

"We were so close at Rodante, you and I. We spent our time together, we laughed, we had our lunches together, you shared your life with me... and then you fucked Timothy! I wanted to die, I wanted to kill. You were mine, and then you married that worthless man-whore."

Pity, and now sadness. God, she couldn't explain the emotions that kept overwhelming her. But the desire to finally break that silence in a meaningful way, to throw something back at George, was too strong.

"You were my friend, George." She could see her words impacting Sam, still standing by the wall, an arm's length away from the desk, and her eyes were wide and full of sympathy. But George gulped and went on, seemingly not hearing Magdalene.

"After a while, as you made Headmistress, I understood. You needed him to become who you should have been all along. So I forgave you."

"You forgave me?" Her words remained quiet, but she squashed the note of melancholy from it. Her jaw tightened and she bit her lip hard, tasting copper and reveling in the blood. That anger, the fury that had given way to pity and sadness, reared its head again, squashing any other emotion. Her muscles coiled, an animal before a lethal jump, one she wasn't at all certain she would be able to contain.

“You had to do what you needed to do. You had a long journey to get to the position you told me you dreamed to achieve, and any means were appropriate. I forgave you. I love you, of course I forgave you.”

George’s eyes were unseeing, glistening with unshed tears as they seemed to stare into the past, and Magdalene realized that her own emotions, her heartache, were lost on her former friend. She wasn’t seeing the danger looming as the Dragon inside Magdalene was unfurling its wings.

“But he didn’t love you! There wasn’t a skirt he wouldn’t chase. You were so consumed with reforming Rodante, with making a name for yourself, you never saw that he wasn’t close to being good enough for you. And so I set him up with that girl. His PA was so smitten with him, it didn’t take much to persuade her to climb into Timothy’s bed that night. I gave her a spare key. Said it was from Timothy. And you took my advice to come home early—”

“You set Timothy up?” Incredulous, her voice was but a whisper, and she knew she couldn’t raise it even if she tried. The unexpected confession stumped even her anger, the shock of it slapping her in the face. Magdalene had cried for days, heartbroken, and betrayed by the man whom she loved and yet...

“He deserved it. He’d have cheated on you regardless, sooner or later. So I made sure it happened sooner.”

The sheer enormity of the havoc that George had wreaked on her life was slowly seeping into her bones. She was glad to be sitting, or she’d surely stagger by now. Her knees felt like jello.

But she needed to speak, to say something, anything, to stop feeling like this. To stop George from victimizing her further. She needed to take back some part of herself.

“You broke my marriage.”

“That marriage wasn’t right for you. I was right for you. I am the only one who loves you the way you deserve to be loved. All-consumingly.”

And now Magdalene moved. With great care, her legs barely holding her, she stood up, rooted to the spot, hands flat on the surface of her desk, her tense and tired neck yet unable to lift her face. She felt weighed down by chains, rendering her powerless. The Vacheron was gone, her own emotions were the ones holding her back now. It was time to break free of them.

“Go on.”

The sensation of being enveloped in a spider’s web crept along her skin and with it the compulsion to wash herself clean of the silken thread. The

feeling—gross and relentless—would surely keep her awake at night.

So no, the last thing she wanted was for George to continue, but this had to be finished once and for all, and if she didn't hear all of it then and there, it would never be. This well of madness, indeed, was all-consuming, and George needed to voice it, even though Magdalene was already sick to her stomach from hearing what appeared to be the tip of an unending iceberg.

“We were happy then. You and I. Yes, you were so hurt, so broken after the divorce, but you got over it, I was there to hold you as you cried. You made me so happy. You stayed with me those months. I watched you sleep. So beautiful, Maggie. Mine.”

Sam recoiled and Magdalene's gaze was drawn away for a brief respite. She took in the pale features and the sheer horror in them at hearing the words of this insanity spoken out loud. Yet sadly, it was a better sight than the person speaking.

“We had years. Years! Happy, peaceful years together. And then you went to that damned conference in New York and when you returned, I knew...”

George swallowed convulsively, and her gaze, suddenly directed at Sam, was full of pure poison. As she turned back to face Magdalene, she spewed venom in every direction.

“I knew your every expression, every line on your face, your every smile, every frown. And you came back glowing. You came back... freshly fucked! I could smell it on you for days, no matter how many showers you took. You kept thinking about her. It was all over your face. The dreamy expression of reliving the sex. The spacing-out in conversations. You returned changed. I hated it. I couldn't stand it.”

George swiped her fingers over her face, but when she let her hands drop, her expression as apathetic as before, as if the pain had dulled her senses, and no matter how many times she tried to clear her mind, nothing helped anymore. Magdalene held her breath.

“But then you got the position at Three Dragons and I thought we would have a new start. I forgave you again. You kept hurting me and I kept forgiving you. I had dreams of finally confessing to you that I'm the one who loves you best, truest, who has been by your side, who made you who you are. But the very first day, I came into your office, and this whore was throwing it in your face that you'd slept together and I knew... I knew she was the one from New York, because you just weren't yourself around her.

You were disgusting. Pining, longing. Wanting her, and she cared only about this goddamned school. She was using you, and you couldn't even see it. So I had to hurt her, had to punish her. For you!"

Pity, sadness, disgust...whatever else she may have been feeling, all were gone in the blink of an eye, and Magdalene saw nothing but red. The earlier image of blood dripping from her fingertips overtook her, and it must have shown on her face, because George recoiled, real fear in her eyes.

But Magdalene didn't care. In fact, she wanted George to be afraid, because it turned out that hunting her and ruining her life and her marriage was a pittance compared to the other thing she had confessed to.

"You hurt Sam because she and I were together in New York?" Magdalene let her rage fly.

"She didn't deserve you! She had to pay! So I wanted to hurt her a little. But it was the kid who sprained her ankle, and she didn't even get electrocuted because she was wearing those damned boots. There were some other things, the broken floorboard, the loose balcony railing—but she missed those. Nothing could touch her."

There was a roar in Magdalene's ears. The Dragon inside her coiled for a strike. She could barely push the words out, the desire to hurt was so strong.

"Joanne stepped on that floorboard, and only because Sam was near, she was caught in time to prevent serious injury."

Sam had been so scared that evening, when a floorboard had given way under Joanne in the faculty dormitory, and she'd miraculously managed to save her from a dangerous fall. Magdalene's blood boiled, remembering how terrified the older woman had been; so much so that even she herself had been worried for her, in spite of their history.

She ended up taking Joanne to Boston the day after, to have her seen by the best ortho surgeon, despite the protestations that everything was fine. Magdalene told herself it was just in case. And not because she cared about her old teacher or because she somehow felt responsible, because she should have fixed the damn floors long before anyone got injured. The guilt had eaten at her for weeks.

And it had been George all along...

A tortured growl shook Magdalene out of her memories.

"What do I care? You were under her spell, you worked day and night to make sure she was happy, that the school was the way she wanted it, and she was never grateful. You were getting a bit too suspicious though, so I had to

convince you that it was Orla who was after you, with rats and threatening letters and emails and the soy milk. It worked before, at other schools, you'd be so isolated, you'd always turn to me and we'd be together. And here again, it was easy since Orla is such an idiot. She kept believing my every word, that you would destroy the school. It was so very easy to make her hate you. After all, she already envied you so much for taking her position."

The vitriol kept pouring out. More and more and more, until Magdalene felt she was drowning in evil, in a morass of malice. Such simple things. Small, deliberate, everyday words and deeds that had poisoned the minds of so many people, that had caused so much pain, that could have caused so much more. That could have killed people.

That almost did kill people, almost killed Sam...

"And the attic?" Magdalene, relentless in her pursuit of the full truth, straightened her spine, schooling her face. The fury was gone. Only purpose remained. To end this, once and for all.

"You took her to the mainland, and I could tell you'd fucked her, and I knew you wouldn't be able to stop yourself. It's like she was your disease. One has to cut out the disease to make the body whole and healthy again. She had to go." George's chuckle was ugly.

The play was over and the curtain dropped. Magdalene was done with theater too. She reached under her desk and pulled out the phone, the voice recorder app clearly visible when the screen lit up. George's eyes widened at the realization that her every word had been captured, preserved as evidence, but Magdalene only gritted her teeth and growled, "go on," and George lowered her hands in her lap and obeyed.

"You ordered the archives moved from the basement, so I moved them to the attic, and as I was moving them, one of the laborers wondered if we weren't at all concerned about how big of a fire hazard it was becoming, with the old furniture and old electric up there in a dusty attic. It's like he wrote a step-by-step plan for me to get rid of *her*." She spat the pronoun as if it tasted bitter on her tongue.

Still, George did not take her eyes off her, once again drinking her in with decidedly sick fervor. Magdalene swallowed hard, trying to tamp down her nausea. She'd burn this dress. There was no washing off this dirt.

"It was very easy to set up. Very easy. You know how industrious I am. You always praise me for being smart, for being efficient. I was very efficient that night. But then you arrived, and my whole plan was ruined. So I had to

change things up. I took the picture and sent it to Orla, set that bitch up to take the fall. Really, for someone who used to hold such an important and authoritative position, she is a remarkably stupid woman.”

Alden had told her about a picture circulating among the trustees, one that Orla had brought to the mainland the night the school burned down. The photo showed Magdalene and Sam kissing, and Joel had been frothing at the mouth to use it to break her contract. Magdalene had tried but failed to muster a sliver of care.

The picture had resulted in Orla’s arrest, since it had been taken from such an angle that only someone who’d been in the attic with them could have taken it. Seeing the old headmistress earlier, running to save the day alongside Sam and Joanne had been jarring. But it all made sense now. George had set Fenway up for the fall.

Determined, Magdalene leaned on her hands, and even the few inches closer to George felt foul.

“Tell me, if Sam wouldn’t have had the wherewithal to aim for the hinges and break down the door that way, would you have come and saved me? Or would you have let me burn?”

She didn’t need the answer. It was all over the silence, all over George’s tears, all over her shaking hands. George, her secretary, her ‘best friend’ was a failed murderer.

And Magdalene would get it all on record. So she could end this. If she hadn’t seen this coming, if so many people got hurt because of this sick obsession, the least she could do was finish it with as little damage as possible. And a full confession would ensure that.

“For a couple of seconds after taking the picture, I just stood there and watched the two of you together, and I hated it so much, because I knew... I knew then that it didn’t matter if you were fired based on that photo. It didn’t matter if you left Dragons. You weren’t mine anymore. You didn’t want me anymore. You hadn’t spent a single evening with me since we’d landed on these wretched rocks. You only wanted her. I had to punish you, too. If you weren’t going to be mine, you weren’t going to be anyone else’s.”

The bile in Magdalene’s throat gave way to a scream.

“I was never yours!” The words, like bullets, pierced the stillness, and it was George’s turn to quail.

Magdalene couldn’t take it anymore. All bets were off. She would either strangle George or slap her, possibly both. She counted on Sam to hold her

back. Maybe. Magdalene finally stepped out from behind the desk. She took a few steps, her heels—a metronome, the only sound in the room.

The last remnants of reason prevailed, and instead of striking, Magdalene did something she knew would inflict much greater pain. She spoke her truth.

“In that moment, George? That moment you hated so much? I was happy, safe and beloved! I was everything I ever wanted to be.”

George’s tears spilled over, and her sob was wretched. Magdalene’s tone didn’t waver.

“When the police come, you will tell them again what you just told Sam and me. You will confess, you will take whatever plea deal they offer you. There will be no trial. You will not drag Sam or Timothy or me or this school through more dirt than you already have.”

Magdalene bit the inside of her cheek, tasting blood, the pain a steady leveler to the madness in front of her. She’d cry and grieve later. Now she’d make sure the snake would never slither back, would never touch one of her own ever again.

“And after?” George’s voice trembled with tears.

“After?” Like a bird of prey, Magdalene swept close to her, their faces inches apart. The stench of fear was almost unbearable. She curled her lip, disgust etched in her every word. “After? George, I trusted you. I gave pieces of myself to you, to our friendship through the years. There were times when the wolves were hounding me, when I believed you were my only friend. And yet you were the wolf that stalked me and hunted me all my life. The one who ruined my marriage, who destroyed my relationship with a man who did not deserve to be used this way, despite his many faults...”

Her breathing was too fast, her heartbeat too loud in her ears, but she refused to let that get in her way. Magdalene straightened and looked down at George, who was suddenly so small and pathetic. But she needed to say this last piece. It was vitally important that George hear it. That Sam hear it too.

“You crossed all the lines, George. Lines that I will never allow anyone to cross ever again. But one in particular, you never should have. So there will be no ‘after’. Even if they ever let you out of whatever miserable hole they put you in, you better never show your face in front of me again. Because of that line, George. If you’re wondering which one it is... You hurt Sam, George, and for crossing that line alone, I could ruin you.”

And just like that, all hell broke loose. As George was howling and

screeching about loving her, a group of cops came barreling into the room, Sheriff Green read George her Miranda Rights while she continued to spew hate at Sam and profess that she'd only ever wanted to love Magdalene. Joanne and Orla were trying to hold off Lily and the other girls, who were suddenly in the hallway, causing even more of a commotion.

And amidst all the chaos, Magdalene focused only on Sam who returned her gaze with so much love, so much devotion, eyes full of unshed tears. And Magdalene knew her own would come later. But for now, in those shining depths, she found her peace, and her relief, and her reason. To go on, to love, to live, despite the misery inflicted on her for years.

She'd need to process what had happened and she'd need to move on. But under the light of those eyes, under their warmth and their kind acceptance, Magdalene knew she'd be given time and space and safety. And she'd heal.

OF IVORY CHAPELS & RELUCTANT RING BEARERS

Three years later...

THE CHAPEL WAS her crowning glory, if she said so herself. She didn't bother hiding her smile at the memory of years ago, of Sam demanding to know why Magdalene was spending the meager remnants of the school's money on this one building.

How was the then-Magdalene, in full let-me-stick-it-to-the-trustees mode, to explain that this was all part of her big, strategic plan?

At the time, Reverend Lavalley had already been on board, and all the proverbial ducks had been aligned in a straight row, nobody daring to quack. Because the reveal was a beautiful moment of pure retaliation coming to fruition, and Magdalene savored every second. Sue her, she loved a good revenge subplot.

And then it had all gone up in literal smoke and, for give or take a year, was a pile of ashes and dirt. She'd walked those grimy marble floors of the decimated chapel, periodically stopping by as the school surrounding it was being restored in leaps and bounds.

She touched the masonry and the wrecked balustrades, the small and large details of lives lived, prayers asked and hopefully answered, thousands of girls passing through this building under the guidance of various men, some of whom had no business wearing the cloth that had been bestowed upon them.

That's in the past now...

And it was. Yet a year after the fire, Magdalene had still not signed off on the plans for the chapel. She'd told herself it was because there was no more revenge to seek. She'd told herself it was because Joel Tullinger had resigned his position on the Board. She told herself many things. But the chapel lay in ruins, and Magdalene continued to walk among them every week.

Sam kept her own counsel, occasionally finding Magdalene there on quiet evenings when the students were safely tucked in in the rebuilt dormitories. Willoughby would bump his big head against Sam's shin, then make a cat loaf waiting for his humans to go home. Nonetheless, Sam would extend her hand and tug Magdalene close, never one for showy displays of public affection. And no, Sam never asked about the place or the last vestiges of destruction on the Dragons' land.

Until she did more than ask. Until Magdalene woke up one morning to the chapel being the first point of order on the Board of Trustees' agenda. Since Joel had stepped down and with Sam now occupying Alden's role, the meetings became more regular and were held on school grounds, transparent and participatory.

Sam was out for her usual run, so Magdalene could not quiz her. And after said run, her fiancée made herself remarkably scarce throughout the entire morning until the Board meeting, and then the scene was set.

"Yes, Headmistress, this is a come-to-Jesus meeting."

Alden, now in an advisory role only, chuckled at his own pun. On any other day, she'd have found it funny. And okay, she struggled to keep a straight face, because it was funny either way.

"What would the esteemed Board wish me to achieve this time? Walk on water, speaking of Jesus, Stanton? Move mountains?" She allowed the smile on her features to bloom, because these instances when Sam tried to be devious were so rare and so attractive, so entirely captivating and adorable, and eventually led to some of the best sex in her life. So Magdalene relaxed into this game and decided to enjoy herself.

"While I think Amber would love to be moved closer to Sky Blue—as I long suspected they had some sort of love story going—and Viridescent, in turn, would very much prefer to be left entirely out of those affairs, it's the chapel that needs our attention, Headmistress." Sam's voice was beguiling, and Magdalene realized she'd walked into this trap willingly.

Magdalene had no particular affinity for the building. And yet, to her sudden realization, her eyes filled with tears, jarring and hot and out of

nowhere, and she struggled to contain them. Sam, mouth agape, her own eyes wide, and full of instant apologies, was on her feet in a second, but Magdalene was already up and moving, throwing an apologetic, “there’s something in my eye, do continue without me,” over her shoulder.

SHE ENDED up on those cracked marble floors of the roofless building. The walls that had been ivory once upon a time rose up like broken bones, with the melted stained glass windows now gaping wounds among the prone skeleton. Why was she even here? When everything around her was being restored and rebuilt and renewed, why was she here, of all places? Why was she so reluctant to... move on?

As the thought crossed her mind, familiar steps sounded in the distance, and Magdalene realized Sam was making as much noise as possible so as not to startle her with her approach.

God, she loved her, she loved her so much.

“What’s going on, love?” Sam’s voice cracked at the last word, reminding Magdalene how it had taken her fiancée some time to find an appropriate name to call her when nobody else was around and when they were just Magdalene and Sam. And ‘love’... Well, it was so fitting. Because every day she felt Sam’s love.

From the evening in the Manhattan bar, to the night in the Greenwich Village hotel, to their afternoons on the Amber Cliff, then slowly to who they were today. Magdalene and Sam. Together. In love.

And she saw love in Sam’s eyes every day, too. On the most horrific of days, when they’d been kneeling on the floor of the burning school, surrounded by smoke, not knowing which direction would take them to safety, to the day when Sam slayed the wolf that had hunted Magdalene all her life.

As George spewed hatred and bile, as her poison was flicked in the air like venomous confetti, Sam’s eyes had shone with love, affection, compassion, and assurance.

You are my love, and nothing will ever change that. Love. My love.

And that day, one of the worst in Magdalene’s life, had been made a little better, her shoulders were weighed down by less grief and sorrow and yes,

guilt.

“I feel responsible, darling.” The words tumbled out of her mouth, and she closed her eyes at the humiliation. Enough time had passed, surely she should have dealt with this...

“For the school burning down?” Sam’s fingers circled her wrist and just held, not pulling or pushing. A connection, not unlike her old Vacheron, lifesaving in the end. “For George?”

George... The wolf... Twenty years of stalking, of wet, heavy breathing on the other end of the line...

Magdalene flinched. To this day, her hands would go numb at her cell ringing out of the blue with an unknown number. And George had begun to serve twenty-five years on a plea deal she took all the while screaming that she was doing this for Magdalene. Alden, despite losing the election, continued to hold a lot of sway with the DA’s office, and as Magdalene found out later, the bargain wasn’t all that advantageous to her former best friend. In fact, Magdalene had a distinct suspicion that, had George not tried to kill Alden’s daughter, they would have been more lenient.

Still, knowing that George would likely never see the light of day as a free woman did nothing to assuage Magdalene’s guilt.

“Darling, do you know how many times I told myself that I would deal with my suspicions later, my presentiments, her strange reactions, and even my mother’s conviction that George was obsessed with me?” Magdalene took a tentative step towards Sam and was instantly enveloped in the welcoming arms.

“No, I don’t know, love. But I do know that you’ve had your hands full. And not only this year. For years. And she was your only friend. I think some slack must be cut here.”

Magdalene burrowed her face in the fragrant warmth of Sam’s neck and sighed.

“I don’t know if I can, Sam. I don’t know if I should. Someone should pay for all of this. Someone should grieve for it, too.” She pointed with her chin, since she was reluctant to let go of Sam.

Sam turned her head slowly, her heart beating a steady tattoo under Magdalene’s fingertips. A rhythm that had come to mean life itself to Magdalene. When Sam spoke, her voice was hoarse, breaking slightly at inflection points.

“I see destruction wrought by fire, set off by an arsonist’s hand, love. I

see bare walls, brick and granite and marble, cracked and broken. I see wood and glass and shingles torn apart and scattered. And I know that maybe you've been torturing yourself by leaving up this ruin, untouched, in order to pay for a sin you haven't committed."

Magdalene froze in Sam's arms, but her fiancée simply hugged her tighter. And after a while, she was no longer able to keep the tears at bay. She sobbed, pain and betrayal racking her body, and Sam just held her, absorbing all the hurt, taking it away from her, even if Magdalene desperately tried not to let it touch her beloved.

"Twenty years, Sam..." Tears still streaming down her cheeks, Magdalene took a step back and looked around, Sam letting her go with the ease of someone who knew their partner's moods, their needs, and understood the desire to not be touched for a moment. "I saw nothing. And she destroyed what I held dear. While almost succeeding to take away everything I cherish most. Because you are everything, Sam."

She turned away from Sam, shoulders shaking under the onslaught of memories and horrifying scenarios.

It didn't happen, she's here, she's right here...

"She took neither, love. Look around you." Magdalene faced Sam once again, and raised an eyebrow. They were standing in the middle of a charred disaster. Sam did not rise to the bait, but instead moved towards a gaping hole in the brick wall that once had been a dazzling stained glass window. "Look beyond. The school is reborn. It persevered. It thrived. Like a phoenix from the ashes."

She extended her hand, and Magdalene went to her, intertwining their fingers. Sam kissed her knuckles and looked into her eyes. "You did this. Dragons was crumbling long before George set it on fire. And your arrival heralded rebirth. Some things cannot go on until they are razed to the ground and built back up. I believe that was the case here." She planted another kiss on Magdalene's wrist, before pulling her even closer. The last light of the day poured into the gutted chapel behind them.

"So tell me, is the reason for not signing off on those magnificent chapel rebuild plans that you needed a permanent reminder for self-flagellation?"

Magdalene started.

"Ouch." She bit her lip and once again wanted to escape the confines of the strong arms holding her close.

"Ouch, nothing. I didn't mean to ambush you at the board meeting, but

something had to give, and I know coddling you only makes you slide deeper into the maudlin and the morbid. All gothic maiden-like. God, you kept nursing emotionally draining wounds on your body for decades because nobody told you it's okay to let go, love." Sam took a deep breath and gave Magdalene a long look, filled with warmth and affection and understanding. "It's okay. Let go."

Magdalene stared into the shining bright eyes of the woman who was her whole world, and as the sun was setting, framing her in the orange and gold, pink and purple inks of dusk, she felt the weight begin to lift. Sam had healed the wound she'd teased her about, and Sam had freed her once again from the regrets of the past.

Magdalene had smiled. And then she'd laughed. A full, carefree laugh shook her shoulders this time, and she'd thrown her arms around Sam's neck, knowing she'd be held, she'd be safe, she'd be loved.

AND HERE SHE WAS NOW, two years after the conversation among the ruins of the burnt-down chapel. Two years after she had signed off on the plans. Two years after she and Sam had decided that if they were to marry, it would be here. Amidst the renewed ivories of marble and the ambers of oak.

Next to her, Reverend Lavalley waited silently, a smile playing on her handsome features. Magdalene could see her mother in the front pew, already crying, drying her eyes with an Hermes scarf. Well, Candace wasn't the center of attention today, so that was probably why she was shedding tears. And honestly, who needed a handkerchief when you could show the world that abusing a two thousand dollar accessory was a feasible option for you?

Funnily enough, despite being polar opposites, Candace and Sam had hit it off like two peas in a pod. That is, once her mother had stopped teasing Sam and both of them decided that focusing on Magdalene was a more worthwhile pursuit. Magdalene didn't mind. Sam mellowed some of the more mercantile and cutting edges when she and Candace were together, and Magdalene began to enjoy her mother's company exponentially. There was even talk about attending another one of Candace's weddings, with Sam mentioning she really wanted to experience the spectacle.

Except, Magdalene knew that despite her mother's outward shallowness,

Sam loved the woman, and wanted to be there for her.

And wasn't it a wonder that Candace had finally gotten to enjoy a daughter—in-law—who genuinely liked her and with whom she had been given a clean slate—something she'd never been able to achieve with Magdalene.

Next to Candace, Alden looked even thinner and paler. He'd had another heart attack in the past year, but bounced back rather well. Ironically, it was his connection with Magdalene that was the more meaningful one these days. Sam had remained neutral and distant with him. They had a civil but thoroughly uninvolved relationship, and Magdalene sensed that Sam was happiest that way, while Alden would have fetched the stars from the sky if that meant his daughter would be content. So he kept his distance from her with an abundance of respect, if with an equal amount of regret.

But since his loss of the Governor's race, he had become more involved in the school business, and that put Magdalene and him into sometimes daily contact. And Magdalene, who never had a father figure to speak off, begrudgingly ended up appreciating the old jackass. After everything he had done, all the years she had hated him... She wanted to laugh at how the tables had turned and how time played jokes on all of them. And his money still paid for everything. The fund he and Sam had set up for the school using his millions would ensure its permanence for decades to come.

Timothy remarried and was on his honeymoon, though Magdalene suspected he would not have attended today's event regardless. They had finally drifted apart in the last few years, their unhealthy closeness dissipating. And she was genuinely happy that he'd found someone. Even if that someone was a redhead with mile-long legs and a smart mouth. Magdalene had kept her thoughts on the matter to herself.

Well, mostly to herself since the one other being she could and regularly did share her thoughts with was currently sitting next to her, tail around his paws, neat and chubby and ginger. As if sensing that she was thinking about him, the tom raised his head and meowed, his voice still creaky and rather hilarious for such a rotund cat.

He was wearing a tuxedo and Magdalene leaned down and straightened his bow tie that had the little pouch containing the rings attached to it. His face was the epitome of stoic endurance under supreme torture, and just before they'd exited the dressing room, she'd caught him trying to tear his tux to shreds. Willoughby's expression when caught was one of pure

contrition, but she sensed it was not because he was genuinely sorry.

And that was okay. Sam had bought the tuxedo and she really should have known better. Magdalene, always the one spoiling her pet rotten, decided that she would absolutely let him destroy the offending garment just as soon as his ring-bearing duties were over. She bent down, gave him a quick pat and whispered, "Not long now." He rubbed against her gown as if sealing their deal.

The music started. Her ears were ringing, so she could barely process that it was time. For the love of her life to step into the sunlit chapel, clad in satin and lace and holding a bouquet of jasmine and lily of the valley. For Sam to start walking towards Magdalene, towards the rest of their lives; where they would both be safe and loved.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Well, well, well, if it isn't Mila coming in here to take back her own words...

Funny how having been asked countless of times if I was done with Dragons, I kept unequivocally saying, Yes. I am. Done. Absolutely. Never again. And then I wasn't.

I owe the incomparable Abby Craden the impetus to write this book. As I was savoring her narration of *The Headmistress*, she got to that one chapter... You know the one... The one where George confesses. As I listened to my own words it occurred to me that we only see that scene through Sam's eyes and for the life of me, I couldn't imagine what could possibly be going on in the heart of the person who's entire life has just been blown to smithereens. So, Abby, thank you!

And of course, once I told the people in my life that Magdalene Nox would be making a comeback, they merely nodded. I guess, they always knew I couldn't let her go. Not just yet.

So here are the thanks to those who have, at times, carried me on their shoulder through this book and through the past year of my life.

To Em.

These are getting more difficult with each book, you know? It feels like in every acknowledgement section I write that you are the reason this or that particular book exists. The repetitions—despite you despising them and melting all of them—don't make this fact any less true. You are. And that's that.

To Caulfield.

For jumping on this wagon and cheering every twist and turn of this journey. For your own ginger cat.

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To my patrons.

You are the cavalry over the hill, allowing me to be free in creating, in following this path.

To my readers.

All of this is because you keep reading my words.

Thank you!

Milena McKay

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Milena McKay is a Lambda Literary and Golden Crown Literary Society award-winning author.

Milena is a romance fanatic, currently splitting her time between trying to write a novel and succumbing to the temptation of reading another fanfic story. When not engrossed in either writing or reading, she runs and practices international human rights law.

She is a cat whisperer who wears four-inch heels for work while secretly dreaming of her extensive Converse collection. Would live on blueberries and lattes if she could.

Milena can recite certain episodes of The West Wing by heart and quote Telanu's "Truth and Measure" in her sleep.

Her love for Cate Blanchett knows no bounds.

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