



The Headmistress

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Category: Romance, Adult, Lesbian Romance

Description: A chance encounter. An unforgettable night.

And back home, trouble is brewing on the remote island of Three Dragons, where nothing feels like it used to. Alone and lonely, Sam Threadneedle wishes upon a star, hoping for change. But when said change comes, it's with a roar and not a whimper.

Torn between loyalty and lust, Sam is forced to re-evaluate everything. Can she and the Home of Dragons withstand the storm that is Magdalene Nox, or will any and all crumble? Not everything is as it seems, and as she slowly unravels the mysteries behind the centuries-old walls, Sam realizes that home is much more than oak and stone.

Total Pages (Source): 74

Of Dragons & Wishes

The light from the street lamps trickled into the small hotel room in silver threads, impeded by the hastily drawn shades, marking the bed and the figures entwined on it with lines that seemed to separate reality from imagination.

If this was a dream and Sam was to wake at any moment, she hoped she'd remember every sensation. How the skin underneath her lips glimmered eerily with a sheen of perspiration, and how the body under her fingertips moved, graceful even in rapture. Making another memory, she lowered her head again, choosing to keep her eyes open and to watch the havoc her mouth wreaked on her lover.

Her lover, whose spine was arched back, head thrashing on the scattered pillows, body taut as a bowstring. Her lover, who let out a sensuous moan that tore open something inside Sam. Her lover, who was undone by Sam's lips and Sam's tongue, and who grasped at the ruined sheets in a futile effort to stave off the sensation and to keep herself from the precipice. All for naught, for when the climax overtook her, like an arrow from that bowstring, Sam set her free. Unable to behold the sheer beauty in front of her, Sam surrendered and closed her eyes, still hoping to remember everything.

* * *

"Thank heavens, I thought this school year would never end! The brats are gone and it's time to celebrate!" Joanne Dorsea's excited voice sounded loud right next to

Sam's ear, jolting her out of her reverie. Three months and Sam still got lost in thought, remembering the tiny hotel room and all the things she had no business keeping this close to the forefront of her consciousness. She wanted to roll her eyes at her own foolhardiness—if not outright stupidity—and turned her attention to her colleague.

Here she was in the middle of the end-of-year party held, as usual, by the illustrious Headmistress at her cottage, a stone's throw from the school itself. And instead of focusing on the things at hand, such as the rather decent whiskey she was clutching, Sam's mind was miles away.

She tried to subtly shake her head to dispel the treacherous memories and focus on the present. Joanne, her erstwhile friend, mentor, and for all intents and purposes mother figure, was grinning and enjoying herself, sipping on her own drink. Sam willed her brain to function and tried to form coherent words. What was that? Brats?

“Hush, Jo, or they will think you hate the children or dislike being a teacher here at Dragons. Plus didn't you win the sweepstakes when Sky Blue took all the awards this year? You should be thrilled.”

She recalled the ultra-competitive finals of the lacrosse and soccer championships, where Sky Blue House had claimed glory in the dying seconds of both games. Sure, it devolved into a brawl, as these things usually did, with the girls as animated and excited as they were. Still, it had certainly been much more interesting than their total domination in the Debate Club she herself chaired. But Sam would take that observation to her grave. As far as her public stance was concerned, Debate Club ruled and was the absolute best and most riveting activity in the Academy. If she privately enjoyed cheering for the Sky Blues during their sports competitions, no one needed to be the wiser. And if under duress, she could always tell them she'd been a Sky Blue once upon a time herself, when she had attended Dragons and worn the Dragonette uniform.

“I am thrilled. For a second there I thought Amber House would beat the Sky Blues in the soccer championship, but your house persevered, little one.”

Sam had to smile at the old nickname that tended to pop up every time she and her friend found themselves alone. Joanne had called her that when she was five, and still did so now that Sam was almost thirty and no longer little by anyone’s stretch of the imagination, standing at a pretty commanding height. In fact, just the right height to have looked directly into those intriguing eyes and to not have to bend her head to kiss those sensual full lips that night three months ago.

“Where do you keep disappearing to, my girl?” Joanne gave her a knowing gaze, and Sam suddenly felt like she was five again and Joanne had caught her with jam smears all over her face, despite claiming that she had not been down at the kitchens stealing blueberry pie filling.

“Ah, Jo...”

“‘Jo’ nothing. You’ve been acting like this ever since you came back from that conference in New York. Three months ago, was it? Spacing out. Daydreaming. What has gotten into you, Sam? Or should I say who?” The older woman’s eyes were twinkling with mischief.

“Oh my god!”

Sam’s scandalized hiss made Joanne laugh out loud.

“Girly, you are forgetting that I listened to you go on and on and on about Abigail Hodges when you were fifteen. It was all you talked about, her hair, her smile, her eyes, her—” Joanne made a demonstrative move with her hands in front of her chest, and Sam all but choked on her whiskey.

“Shhhh, Jo!” Sam looked nervously around to see if anyone paid any attention to them, but with the party in full swing, she could count on relative privacy. Still, her sexuality wasn’t something she wished to discuss around her colleagues. “Someone will hear. And I have never mentioned her attributes.”

“Always a worrier, little one. People are too busy getting drunk to care about us. You were easy to tease then, and you are easy to tease now, Sam.”

Joanne chuckled, obviously tickled pink by having the upper hand over her protégé. Sam pouted at how easily she was still falling into these situations with Joanne. She loved her like the mother she had never known, but damn if it wasn’t just a touch annoying that Joanne could still read her like an open book.

“Jokes aside, I worry about you. You haven’t been yourself lately. You can beat around the bush all you want, but you are broody, you spend way too much time on that cliff of yours where you think nobody can see you, and your head is somewhere else. Or is it your heart? Nether regions?”

Sam groaned and hid her face in her hands as Joanne simply laughed at her again and gave her a brief hug.

“Okay, okay, I will stop teasing you, but we are not done with this conversation, not by a long shot. Something clearly happened in New York.” Sam tried to school her features into the best poker face she could muster, but Joanne just raised her eyebrow and Sam smiled sheepishly. Both of them were well aware that Sam’s aforementioned poker face was so bad, it was rather legendary around the school.

“Now that I’ve given you enough grief and you’ve as good as confessed to having been up to no good down in the Big Apple, I can change the subject. And to answer your previous question about our darling little pupils, I absolutely do not hate them and they did win me pocket money. But they do become extremely tedious as the

year progresses, and in spring doubly so. All that teenage angst and the hormones? Bah, spare me!” She shuddered dramatically and emptied her glass in one gulp.

“I hear you. The boys from town have been jumping the fence much more often. I understand that’s inevitable with an all-girls school, the attraction for them is just insurmountable. I separated at least three couples from rather compromising positions just last week.”

“Spoilsport. You were their age once, and the way you keep daydreaming about whoever it is that has you completely ensnared, you’re still prone to flights of fancy. Thank goodness you are just a touch more discreet than our esteemed leader. Cause she’s downright shameless tonight. And at least the Headmistress’ flavor of the week is cute. Very much so. And good for her too.”

Sam followed Joanne’s gaze to the front of the room where the dark-haired, older woman held court. As Sam observed, the Headmistress slid her hand up the aforementioned cute guy’s shoulder and into his hair, playing with the longer curls while he blushed rather endearingly.

“Good for her indeed,” Sam chimed in. “It’s been a long and difficult school year, we’re celebrating, she can let her hair down every once in a while. Nothing wrong with that.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

“Okay, okay, you’re right, Sam, she deserves all the rest and recuperation she can get. We all do. I have to say that I’m quite envious of how flirty she is tonight, and it feels like she really doesn’t care who is watching. Perhaps the end of the school term is affecting her much more strongly this year?”

Of relatively small height, with astute blue eyes and a pale complexion, Orla Fenway’s appearance was a proud reflection of her Irish ancestry. A champion brooder with the ability to drink anyone under the table, she was also a well-established published poet in her own right, which seemed par for the course for her countrymen.

Headmistress Fenway had taken over the helm of the once prestigious and exclusive Three Dragons Academy for Girls twenty years ago and had kept the school from falling apart around her with the sheer force of her will, a firm hand, and probably a prayer or two. She walked the very thin line of dwindling funding and outrageous demands from a fickle and tightfisted Board of Trustees, and it took its toll on her. Joanne was right, she looked tired, worn around the edges, and something in Sam clenched at the thought of her mentor and good friend not projecting her usual air of confidence and infallibility.

As if sensing her unease, Joanne placed a hand on Sam’s shoulder with surprising gentleness after pretty much teasing her the whole evening.

“It’s the end of the year, we are all tired, it’s to be expected.”

Sam gave her a lopsided smile, grateful for Jo’s attempts to assuage her anxiety. But they both knew something was off. Yes, Orla was a notorious flirt and went through

men faster than anyone else in Sam's acquaintance, but her behavior was still rather unusual, for she was normally discreet when discretion was called for.

Orla wasn't just a Headmistress and an educator. Her formidable style of teaching had inspired Sam to pursue pedagogical studies herself. She was also a dear friend, and when Sam graduated with honors from Boston College, the Headmistress extended the most coveted invitation of them all - to take over the Math Chair at Three Dragons Academy.

They enjoyed a relationship of vivacious camaraderie and quiet, leisurely evenings spent sipping tea on the deck of the small cottage located next to the sprawling school building.

Seeing her friend looking as gaunt and as worn out as she did, and to observe her behave—while not entirely out-of-character—decidedly in poor judgment, made Sam uncomfortable. Despite Joanne's quiet assurance, she kept watching Orla circulate from one group of guests to the next, often returning to continue her overt flirtation with the young, handsome man from town.

Under Sam's watchful scrutiny, the Headmistress, as if sensing that she was the subject of discussion, approached in a cloud of her signature scent. Roses. Initially, when Orla had started at Dragons, Sam found the scent cloying and distracting. With time and familiarity, she had grown to appreciate the strength and reliability of the flower. You could always count on a rose to be what it was meant to be, no more no less, the centerpiece and attention-grabber of any room. Roses did not pretend, did not hide or obfuscate. Roses reigned. And so did Orla.

As she approached, Joanne removed her arm from around Sam's shoulders and stood just a bit straighter. Despite her friendliness with the staff, Orla still projected an air of forceful authority, even in the midst of a party.

“Oh, do stop hoarding our dear Ms. Threadneedle, Joanne! Other people, such as, for example, our dear History Chair over there on the other side of the room, are damn near pining themselves out of their turtlenecks, observing how you are monopolizing this one’s time.”

It made Sam a touch uncomfortable to be the center of attention, so she tried to deflect it as soon as possible.

“You better be joking about David Uttley, Headmistress. I assure you, he has not been pining over me in the slightest.” Sam gave both her colleagues a quick glare before grabbing another glass of whiskey from the passing server. “Your jokes need work, Headmistress, but you always throw one hell of a party, I’ll give you that.”

“You were always a cheeky one, Sam. I saw you and Jo here keeping an eye on me tonight. I assure you, I’m going to behave. Or as much as I know how to behave.”

Sam snickered and earned herself a light smack on her bicep.

“Stop giggling, missy. And ouch.” Joanne rubbed at her knuckles. “When did you become skin and bones? All this running up and down and around the island, I never understood it, Sam. You run and you run and you get nowhere, cupcake. It’s still an island and you end where you begin.”

“It’s not about getting somewhere, it relaxes me!” Even to her own ears, the defense of her preferred way to exercise sounded weak. She ran to escape her thoughts, even though lately her thoughts chased her and overwhelmed her no matter where she found herself.

“Oh, we are all in agreement that you need some relaxing, hence the delectable Mister David over there may not be such a bad option.” It seemed that Joanne wasn’t the only one who made it her mission tonight to tease her, as Orla smirked and

gestured again toward David Uttley who was lounging by the far wall, ever the removed observer, watching the three women from behind his horn-rimmed glasses.

Before Sam could roll her eyes or protest at another gauche attempt at matchmaking, Joanne elbowed her in jest, clearly amused at Sam's predicament, and Orla raised her hands at their roughhousing.

"Children, children. Please, this is a party, not a sandbox at recess. I enjoy your jokes as much as the next gal, but for the love of god, keep it more or less civil before you scare all the handsome boys away."

Orla rubbed her forehead, and Sam's look turned to concern. Her own sparring with Joanne was par for the course, and in fact, they were notorious for their silly banter—something that was enjoyed by the entire school as it livened up their monotonous days. But Orla looked like she had a nasty headache that was giving her a lot of trouble.

"Before you go all mother hen on me, Sam Threadneedle, it's just a headache. I will leave you and your partner in crime to your shenanigans since you're bound to make it worse. You two keep each other in line enough to remember the teachers' staff meeting tomorrow at the Mess Hall. And before y'all give me more of a headache over the unusual choice of venue for an official gathering, I just want to have coffee and eat a muffin in peace with my friends and colleagues before the end of the year. I don't want to be surrounded by the townies and the racket of the pub. And I will have to clean my cottage for a week after you all depart later tonight. So the Mess Hall it is! Now, allow me to enjoy the company of someone who is hopefully much more fun than the two of you, dears. Sláinte!"

They watched her swan away and exchanged a puzzled look. Sam knew Joanne was just as surprised by the behavior on display from their normally unflappable leader tonight. Come to think of it, Sam tried to remember the last time she'd seen and

interacted with Orla. Not in the past two weeks. The Headmistress had been in Boston in consultations with the Board of Trustees, a select group of people entrusted to steer Three Dragons Academy and its students, as their school motto suggested, along the *Viis Novis*, the Latin term for New Ways.

Sam often wondered what had stood behind choosing a radical motto like that in 1810. It must have taken considerable testicular fortitude on behalf of the founders to decide to go with it, especially for a newly established private boarding school for Protestant girls. Or it was yet another thing about Dragons that wasn't quite what it seemed. Its first charter was overwhelmingly conservative even for the time of its inception.

Still, the motto had been so apt because women desperately needed new avenues back then. Not that a lot of women couldn't still use all the help they could get to pursue new paths towards knowledge, education, and fulfillment today, Sam mused. And despite the charter's conservatism, the school had always had the heart of a rebel.

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Since Joanne had been pulled aside by an acquaintance whom Sam only vaguely remembered, she looked at the assembled group of friends and colleagues, trying to determine what her next course of action should be. The party was still in full swing. She could hear the PE teacher, Jen Rovington, attempting to convince her husband to do a jig with her, and several other teachers were already having a blast on the dance floor.

But despite the joy and camaraderie around her, Sam felt the walls slowly closing in on her and the air getting sparser and sparser. What she needed was solitude, if only because she kept retreating into her own thoughts and finding them in disarray. She felt uneasy, and not just about how out-of-character Orla was acting. Premonitions weren't something she believed in, she was a scientist, a math nerd, and gut feelings

were distinctly unscientific. And yet, she felt discomposed and out of sorts for no particular reason at all.

She wasn't entirely sure it was such a good idea, all things considered, but when in doubt Sam Threadneedle oftentimes chose to play turtle, disappearing into the safety and peace and quiet of her imagination. It happened a lot these days, especially since she'd returned from her trip to New York and had seemingly left her sanity in the small hotel in the heart of Manhattan.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

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Sam exited the cottage and looked around into the evening dusk. In comparison to Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket or other islands off the coast of Massachusetts, Dragons Island was small and utterly unremarkable. And that was fine by Sam. Dragons did not get the tourist crowds the other islands got, but they were better off for it in Sam's eyes.

Around her, the school grounds lay in eerie quiet, sheltered from the ocean wind and the town's prying eyes by three massive cliffs, bearing the names of the legendary dragons: Amber, Viridescent, and Sky Blue.

Fairytale had it that, once upon a time, in order to escape from the minutiae and ruin of men, the dragons had settled on the island, retreating to live amongst its massive rocks. They sought peace, and they'd found it by transforming into the three cliffs that guarded the island on the east side, effectively protecting it from the fury and the clamor of the ocean.

The rocks were illuminated by the sole beam of the Eye Lighthouse, and the legendary Three Dragons stretched in front of her, with the Academy and the school grounds tucked safely between them, like their crowning glory on top of the plateau surrounded by thick pine woods.

This walk towards the cliffs was picturesque, away from the school and the town huddled on the beach down below. The wide-open spaces had always soothed Sam's racing thoughts, even as an introverted and restless child who'd avoided her peers and could not sit still for very long. She had walked this path so many times, had run it,

had skipped it. Sometimes she'd fallen, skinned her knees on the sharp rocky surface, but she always rose, feeling the massive Dragon Cliffs watching over her, their gaze benevolent, their enormous shapes protective over the lonely orphan. A charity case in a rich girls' school and a closeted lesbian in a conservative institution, Sam Threadneedle had always felt awkward. And equally, the cliffs always watched out for her when she felt like the sole round peg in a square hole. She would squeeze herself in it, but it did not feel right then, and it felt uncomfortable still to this day.

They were watching over her now as she trudged up toward her favorite place in the world, past the school to her right, delving deeper into the rocks. She knew every twist and turn of the desolate, narrow road winding up to the cliffs and around the school, and yet whenever the imposing mansion appeared, it always took her breath away. As chiseled and elegant as the Dragon Cliffs were massive and brawny, the Academy reigned over the magnificence of nature as proof of enduring humanity and the fruits of its labor and craftsmanship.

Yet these days very little was left of said magnificence or elegance of old. The school lay sprawled on acres and acres of land that needed tending and care and a considerable investment. The buildings themselves—the Main Hall and its wings that served as dormitories holding the three school Houses, and the surrounding campus and support structures—fared slightly better than the grounds, but that was a testament to the stonemasons of that time, who'd known their craft and had wielded the chisel and hammer to build things that lasted for centuries.

Still, the feeling of decay, of disrepair, was permeating the air, even if only for someone like Sam, who was raised on these grounds and who'd run amok among these walls. She could see the cracks, the gaping wounds in the soul of the school itself, not just in the sagging of a roof or the leaking of a ceiling.

Perhaps it was a poor woman's allegory, but to Sam's mind schools reflected society with great precision. With the American public at a crossroads, torn at the very seams

of the fabric that made the nation, and splitting further, the school had been undergoing the same kinds of changes over the years. The Board of Trustees remained largely the same, as the positions were occupied for life, then passed on to heirs along with all the other property, unless a person wanted to abdicate their responsibilities towards the school. To Sam's knowledge, nobody had ever resigned, as the role wasn't too onerous but very prestigious. Change still happened on the nine-person Board, and it did not always lead to bigger and better things.

In the past twenty years, these nine people had slowly but surely choked the life out of Three Dragons, either with a tightening of the purse strings, or, more recently, by trying to impose a stifling conservative curriculum. The latter changes materialized with the new trustees stepping into their role. They'd called it 'a return to the roots' since the school had begun as a religious institution. Nowadays some of the decisions the board took made very little sense. Orla, who was progressive to the core, kept them at bay as best as she could, but even for someone who was as removed from the gossip about the battles the Headmistress waged with the trustees as Sam was, she could hear the distant rumbling of an impending storm.

Orla had not been able to gain much ground with the Board in her tenure as Headmistress in many aspects of the school management, but for much of her time at Dragons, she had stemmed the tide of the incursions into the school curricula and admission requirements. Which meant there was a very tenuous detente that could blow up at any moment and cover the school, its thirty faculty, and roughly two hundred students with the debris of uncertainty. But the detente was also unsustainable because it was staving off any progress, leaving the school in quite a desperate state. Something would have to give and soon.

Sam took a moment to look back at the majestic building before turning towards the water, slowly making her way to the very edge of the Amber Dragon Cliff. She raised her face, enjoying the cool breeze ruffling the flyaways from her braid and the foaming ocean underneath that was relentlessly trying to overcome the seemingly

insurmountable obstacles in front of it. She understood the impetus. After all, that was what Sam had done all her life. Try, strive, overcome.

This was her favorite place in the entire world, a secluded spot on the chiseled rock overlooking the enormity of the water, yet still sheltered from the storms and the destruction they brought. The structure of the cliff was thus that it created a sort of crevice where little Sam as well as big Sam hid her troubles from the world, rocked to safety by the roar of the ocean and the whistle of the wind. Her spot—as that was the only thing she had ever called the place—also had one of the most exquisite perks going for it. In spring and early summer, it carried a distinctive, fresh and sweet scent, as several evergreen shrubs and vines of wild jasmine grew along the rocks towards it. And that sweet perfume had always signified home. The only home she'd ever known. This unwelcoming place, this uneasy peace, even if the edges of it were consumed by so much uncertainty, made Sam inhale this scent with her whole chest and close her eyes at the almost painful familiarity of it all. No, she never fit in, but if she tried really hard, she could at least pretend that the wild jasmine bloomed for her alone.

She reached into her messenger bag where the familiar weight of a book that she rarely left at home was just as soothing. The worn-out cover of *The Light Princess*—a centuries-old Scottish tale of a girl with no tether, no purpose, and no connection—felt comforting against her chilled hands. During nights like these, when she felt alone in the world, the book seemed uncannily similar to her own life.

She swallowed the unexpected lump in her throat at the anxiety that consumed her, and with one last look around her at the Amber Dragon Cliff, Sam whispered a quick prayer towards the dark and menacing skies above. She made a wish. A wish for change.

Of Woolgathering At Staff Meetings & Entrances Well Made

Slim, long-fingered hands were taking her apart, touch after skillful touch, stroke after determined stroke. She groaned and buried her face deeper in the pillow, biting through the material, no longer embarrassed by being on her knees, or by being this loud, by being this utterly removed from her normal shy self. Was she the one screaming? She was probably keeping half the hotel awake with these obscene sounds. Sam tried to care, desperately tried to find in herself a sliver of shame at her reaction to that touch, but her lover was ruthless, and soon she lost all perception of her surroundings except for those fingertips unerringly finding her center, time and again, dismantling her control and with each heartbeat pushing her farther past the point of no return. When she came to, her face was wet and gentle lips were kissing her tears away. Delicate arms surrounded her and Sam inhaled deeply, a faint scent of jasmine filling her senses.

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Sam sipped her coffee and tried to hide the creeping blush she knew would be tinging her cheeks behind the thick, white mug. Why could she never control these sudden bouts of memories that would overtake her at the most inopportune moments? She smiled into the steam. Idiot. She hadn't been able to control her reaction three months ago when she'd screamed after having one of the most powerful orgasms of her life, and time and distance certainly had not helped matters at all.

It was true, what with Joanne constantly reminding her how distracted she had been lately, and just this morning, as she was getting ready for this staff meeting, she found a portrait in her notebook. In charcoal, her own face was looking at her, the resemblance striking. And the artist had managed to capture that very faraway look, the distracted one, for which Joanne teased her mercilessly. It appeared that her mentor wasn't the only one who noticed her daydreaming, for her pupil, favorite troublemaker, and brilliant artist in the making, Lily Easterly, had also cottoned on to

Sam's spacing out during classes. The portrait had surely been done during their last math class when Sam had forgotten herself for a second. Which clearly was enough for the astute and a bit too perspicacious and precocious Lily, because she had rendered Sam perfectly, down to the slight shading on her sharp cheekbones where, Sam was certain, a blush must have been spreading at the time.

Lily had just started her freshman year of high school when Sam returned to teach at Dragons, but especially in the past year, they had formed an unlikely bond that went deeper, due to how different both of them felt in their rather uniform surroundings at times. Although the opening-up was mostly one-sided, with Lily confiding her thoughts, her secrets, and her crushes to her teacher, Sam felt a deep connection to the girl. And if the portraits that Lily would occasionally sneak into Sam's bag or notebook were any indication, the kid certainly saw right through Sam. As scary a thought as that was.

To distract herself from musings of being transparent to her friends, she looked around at the thirty-odd members of faculty and support staff assembled haphazardly around the Mess Hall central table. They looked like a ragtag bunch. Jeans, sneakers, and oh god, were those leather pants on Jen Rovington? Her sturdy frame did those skin-tight things a lot of justice. The faculty members sat around or mingled, speaking in hushed tones, probably gossiping or recounting last night's party to those who'd missed it, munching on the enormous spread of muffins and cupcakes. Sam looked down at herself and had to smile. In her favorite flannel shirt and black skinny jeans, her feet clad in red Converse, she was very much a lesbian cliché. She just hoped nobody would interpret her attire as such and instead attribute it to her usual student loan-strained financial circumstances. After all, the shoes were ratty, she must've had this pair for over five years.

Bored, tired, yet strangely wired, Sam tried not to think of shopping for clothes and footwear. That way madness and heartache laid. So she just sighed and reached for her mug again. Avoiding stores was how she'd ended up with the five-year-old pair

of Chucks. They looked all right, she mused. They probably had a couple more years in them. As did the fraying cuffs of her shirt. Plus, it wasn't like she had money to spare. She had her dreams of a backpacking trip to Europe all planned out, but even with her frugality and her plans to sleep on campgrounds and in hostels, she'd still cut into her meager savings at the end of her much-awaited five weeks on the continent. But that was next year. This year she had to pay off more of her debts and really, Europe wasn't going anywhere. And neither were her Chucks.

The clock on Sky Blue Tower beat ten times and a massive ginger tomcat, Willoughby, punctual as always, made his way leisurely into the crowded room, hissing to prevent any attempt at unwanted attention from the humans. Not that anyone would dare. They'd all learned their lessons, some the very hard way. He beelined towards the windowsill and took his time endeavoring a rather graceless—due to his bulk—leap onto the crimson velvet cushion set strategically in the sunspot. After circling his bedding a couple of times, Willoughby, sprawled on his back, all four paws in the air, oblivious to the rodents effectively taking over the manor.

Despite being the school mascot and de facto only cat in residence, with supposedly extensive mousing duties, Willoughby had a very interesting routine, one which he observed almost religiously and demanded that others—chiefly the humans inhabiting what he surely thought of as his domain—respected it as well.

Willoughby followed the sun. Morning 'till evening, the tom moved from one windowsill to the next, along with the arc of the sun, laying on the soft, worn cushions, specially placed on those windowsills for him. He did not allow anyone to get close to him or to touch either him or the cushions. Beyond that, he was unbothered by anything occurring around him. He cared little for the students, as long as they gave him a wide berth. The wider, the better. And they did, after some of them had sported nasty scratches from trying to pet him. Willoughby was nobody's pet, and that was well known around the school. Sam kind of liked that about him.

But Willoughby's arrival did not only herald the exact hour, it also meant one other thing. Perhaps for the first time in her life, Orla Fenway was late for a staff meeting. Hell, late for anything. She was famous, nay notorious, for being ridiculously early for every engagement. And yet, Sam realized, she was nowhere to be found at this last staff meeting of the school year. She caught Joanne's gaze and raised her left shoulder in a clumsy attempt at a shrug. She knew Joanne was curious, and she also knew it was a rather well-known fact that, under normal circumstances, Sam would know what was keeping Orla. The whole school was aware that Orla favored her, with Sam serving as her left hand since the right hand was the elderly—and these days rather forgetful—school nurse Ruth Trufault, who was quietly dozing in her oversized chair by the empty hearth.

Sam was just about to go on a reconnaissance mission to look for Orla when the small side door into the Mess Hall opened, and the Headmistress made her way into the massive room. She looked even more tired than she had yesterday, worn and beaten down somehow, and Sam saw Joanne's eyes narrow in obvious concern.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

“Ah, good morning, dear colleagues. Apologies for my tardiness. Been unavoidably delayed, I was. Where’s Ruth? Ah, there you are, sweetheart, good to see you, missed you yesterday at the bash, but we had fun, didn’t we all, my dears?”

Joanne’s eyes narrowed further, and Sam just bit her lip when they landed on her. She was just as dumbfounded by what was happening. It was surreal. The normally put-together, on-time, serious-to-a-fault when it came to school business Orla Fenway was rambling. Moreover, she was doing so while looking disheveled, carrying a bottle of whiskey, and wearing yesterday’s clothes. And, by the look on her stressed-out and anxious face, she hadn’t even had any fun in or out of them. Something was seriously wrong.

Sam darted a quick look around the room that was now rife with tension. The crowd was collectively holding its breath. Even Ruth was now awake and staring at their uncharacteristically flustered leader with wide, bleary eyes. Only Willoughby’s soft, unbothered snoring could be heard.

After it seemed like the Headmistress had taken forever to doctor up her mug at the buffet that was set up on the side, Orla sat down and took a long slurp of her coffee, spreading a big stack of documents in front of her.

“Right, I guess one can only avoid the news for so long before it catches up with you anyway?” She gave Sam a reassuring smile and turned back to the papers in front of her. “It seems like it was just yesterday that I started at Dragons, and yet it’s been twenty years. Where did the time go? I know, I know, it’s all very cliché, but I can’t help but be a touch nostalgic. The majority of you have been here for years, and life at the school is often hectic and messy, and days fly by so quickly. I just hope you all

know how important you are to this institution. From our oldest resident and my Deputy, Ruth, who has been in her position for twenty-five years to Sam, who has held the Math Chair only for three years.” Orla’s smile was so fond, so full of absolute affection, that Sam found her heart clenching. “Though with Sam also having studied at Dragons, she might be the elder statesman here yet.”

Orla laughed, but it sounded hollow to Sam’s ears, so she didn’t join in.

“I mention you all being seasoned Dragons and Dragonettes, my dears, because what I’m about to tell you will not be a major surprise to anyone. This place, once a proud overachiever, has fallen on some rather desperate times. The last time Three Dragons topped any chart of private schools in any discipline or sport was over ten years ago, and I believe that was entirely a fluke. The Academy has been battling for its soul, for its sheer existence, for longer than my tenure here. God knows, I took over in hopes of turning its fortunes around. Three Dragons has stood on these rocks for over two hundred years, the crises, economic downturns, and world cataclysms aside, it has weathered storm after storm, depression, war, pandemics, and more war. You all know I have tried, especially in the last five years, with the reforms proposed by the Board of Trustees and some of the changes to the Board itself ...”

Orla took a long look around the table, as all the faculty members now sat straighter, worry etched on their faces. Her red, tired eyes were somber as she lowered them to leaf through some of the papers in front of her.

“These are the resolutions taken by the Board in the past year since Fredrick Tullinger passed away and his son Joel became a trustee. They are either to cut funds, to change and radicalize our curriculum further in the attempt ‘to return to our Christian roots’ and to steer the school farther from its secular present, back towards its religious past. By hook or crook, I either ignored them, fought them, or obfuscated my way around them.”

She smiled cheekily and winked at Sam, who found herself smiling back this time, remembering their late-night sessions and brainstorming on how to circumvent some of the directives in question. They'd done all right, all things considered.

“However, two weeks ago I received a sternly-worded summons to Boston. It seems the trustees, some of them more esteemed than others, have finally taken a longer, more sober look at the situation at Three Dragons. And according to them, it is beyond dire. We spent days in consultations—I guess you could call some of them screaming matches—but in the end, they made some rather drastic decisions regarding the school.”

If the massive Mess Hall was silent before, now one could hear the proverbial pin drop and the mouse scratch in the corner. Though Sam figured that, while the pin was indeed proverbial, the mice were very real. Willoughby's snoring continued to be an indicator of how he felt about the crisis at hand, in general, and the critters, in particular.

“What sort of decisions, Orla?” Joanne was the first to find her voice.

“I don't know much. We went over the budget, which they were considering shrinking further. The admittance, the attendance, the faculty. We looked into everything. What could be cut, what could be saved.”

“They're looking to cut faculty?” Joanne, while the Art Chair, was also responsible for half a dozen photography and other art-related classes. Everyone in the room knew that the arts were usually the first thing to be cut when funding was scarce. One look at the older woman's drawn face told Sam what she was thinking. All of Sam's protective instincts kicked into gear. Her fear, her anxiety about her home, her family all bubbled up.

“But they can't! Dragons already has seven students per staff member, and we aren't

even considering that not all of them are teaching, we are always counting resident faculty in that number!”

“Ah, here’s my fire-breathing Fourth Dragon right when I need her!” Orla laughed at Sam’s outburst and made the same joke she’d been making ever since they’d met years ago, when Sam herself was a quiet nine-year-old wallflower, hiding from her classmates in the basement of Sky Blue house or on Amber Dragon Cliff.

“Before you deafen me with more questions, I really have no clue what their plans are. They will be here tomorrow though, so you may as well ask them yourselves. However, I rather expect that there will be no need for questions at all since they’re coming specifically to present the new changes or whatever it is they’re planning for the school.”

“They’ll be here?” All heads swiveled towards the hearth, where Ruth Trufault’s usually squeaky voice sounded with surprising clarity. “Why, those rascals have avoided the island like the plague for years.”

“I think you mean some of the previous trustees, Ruth. You all know that there has been some turnover on the Board, with Roswell and Tullinger passing away recently.”

“Roswell was a good one, he was. Irreplaceable,” Ruth wheezed, and Sam could see her eyes fill with tears.

“Well, they did replace him, dearest. And no, unlike Tullinger, whose good-for-nothing son took over from the old curmudgeon, Roswell’s heirs declined the position. Much to my chagrin, as Roswell Junior is a great friend of mine.” As Orla’s hands rustled through the pages in front of her, Sam was fairly certain Roswell Junior was one of Orla’s special friends, kind of in the same vein as the man from last night. Which, all things considered, would’ve worked perfectly for the school, to have one

of the trustees on their side like that. Except it appeared that Orla's luck was running out.

"Ah, here it is." The Headmistress pulled out a sheet from the stack. "Sir Timothy Bowbridge Rodante Nox graciously accepted the position." Orla cleared her throat and read, "'I hereby welcome the undertaking and the enormous responsibility of turning around the dire fortunes of the storied New England Three Dragons Academy for Girls, and communicate my commitment to lifting the school from the doldrums it has hit in the past half a century.'" She put the paper down. "His Lordship issued this press release yesterday."

"Tell me you were not quoting just then." Jen Rovington, standing tall in her rather amazing leather pants, laughed. Sam agreed with the sentiment, the wording was so pompous and ridiculous. But since Orla just lifted an eyebrow in the PE teacher's direction, her laughter died down.

"I was quoting."

"Who talks like that? 'Doldrums? Dire fortune?' I mean, who in the world?" Not willing to give up without at least a final dig, Rovington pressed on.

"Nox? Lord Timothy Nox of the New York Noxes? They're some kind of British nobility, I think his father is an Earl or something or other, I guess hence his title." Joanne reached across Orla to look at the press release herself.

"Any relation to Magdalene Nox?" David Uttley's voice rang clear among the cacophony of others, and suddenly not even the mouse in the corner could be heard anymore.

They all knew 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. The venerable and esteemed-in-some-circles—and much accursed in others—Magdalene Nox had a whole system of reforming boarding schools named for her. TheNox Method, which Sam thought was just a lazy way of naming things. It really should have been theEfficient, Effective and Deadly Method. Sam supposed people who named things just didn't have her imagination.

With Sam's major in Math and her Ph.D. in Educational Theory, she'd had the dubious pleasure of studying the Nox Method. Squeeze the institution until it bleeds dry, destroy the foundation, dismantle everything the school lives and breathes for, and leave a cookie-cutter, a spit-and-polish, lifeless monstrosity in its wake. Sam had to admit she didn't remember much about the Education Management curriculum since she knew she wasn't terribly interested in running an institution. But her professor was a particular opponent of the Nox Method, and so Sam remembered the hatred with which he had taught the class.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

“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...” Jen Rovington’s voice broke with something akin to fear.

“She started at Rodante Academy, it’s where she made a name for herself. Then went to St. Mary in Boston before Trinity. Decimated that school. Just tore it to shreds,” Joanne whispered, her apprehension palpable.

“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 reached for the bottle Orla handed her after she’d poured a generous drop of whiskey into her own coffee.

“He’s her husband, he is.” Ruth’s squeak drew all heads to the hearth, where she peeped at them from her cozy recliner and pulled the 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 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. The Headmistress just nodded and offered the bottle to Joanne, who accepted with a grim shrug. To Joanne’s right, Sam refused, but Orla polished off the

remainder of the booze, shaking every last drop into her mug.

“Seems about right, dear.” Orla made a face after taking a sip. “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 thoughts, Sam did not know.

“Well, don’t keep us all on tenterhooks now, Orla!” The whiskey was clearly making Rovington 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 an enormous 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.”

Sam’s heart stuttered in her chest as Orla threw back her mug and choked on the dregs of coffee and whiskey, coughing. Rovington jumped to her feet to pound her on the back, and Joanne was rummaging in her purse and producing a tissue, but Sam could barely see or hear their scrambling or the cacophony of sounds surrounding her. Her thoughts running wild from all the revelations coming her way, Sam glanced to her left and her heart stopped beating altogether.

Right there, in the massive oaken doors to the Mess Hall, stood a tall, willowy figure and observed the situation unfolding in front of her from behind large aviator glasses. Her head was slightly tilted to the side as if she was paying close attention to the less-than-dignified scene playing out in front of her, but the corners of her mouth were curled in a disdainful smirk, showing exactly what she thought about what she was witnessing. Finally, when Orla’s cough was reduced to an occasional wheeze, the figure stepped into the light, her four-inch, red-soled heels the only speck of color aside from her flaming red hair. Her steps produced a loud clacking noise that penetrated the chaos in an instant.

Sam's mouth was dry, and as the woman took off the large glasses with a flourish, she couldn't help but gape. She knew she probably looked ridiculous, like a total rube, but in that moment there was absolutely nothing else for her to do but stare at the newcomer. Sam felt rooted to the spot, completely bewitched, and helpless to move or say anything. It was a familiar feeling. Hell, she had just been reminiscing about that very state of helpless abandon delivered by those same long, perfectly manicured fingers that were now holding the clearly expensive glasses.

“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 a stylish large watch that was hanging off her slim wrist. “Ah, 10:30 AM. Isn't drinking on school grounds against the school charter, my dears?” The velvety voice practically spat the last words, clearly mocking Orla's customary term of endearment that she'd used just minutes ago. Which to Sam meant only one thing. She must have been standing in the doorway long enough to hear Orla talk about her. To hear them all talk about her.

With the black dress hugging all her lithe curves, the woman took several more strides into the Mess Hall, each step sounding like a gunshot. Out of the corner of her eye, Sam could see Willoughby stand up, stretch, take in his surroundings and vacate the premises to proceed to his next sunspot. Sam had a distinct sensation that most of the people in the room would have followed him, given half a chance.

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

They were on each other the moment the door closed behind them. The first taste of her mouth took Sam's breath and reason away. She knew she was drowning and hazily thought that breathing was perhaps overrated when the feeling of soft, skilled lips was the best thing she had ever experienced. Those lips nipped and caressed, demanding yet patient, rushed yet gentle, hungry yet languid. And the little moans that occasionally escaped her... Like Sam was the best thing she had ever tasted, like she wanted to keep kissing Sam forever. Those moans were enough to make Sam press her harder against the door and hike that ridiculous and amazing, tight-fitting skirt all the way up those ridiculous and amazing thighs and cup her through the crimson satin of the most seductive panties Sam had ever seen. God, you couldn't even call them underwear, or panties really. This work of art was lingerie, and Sam dropped to her knees to see it up close. As her breath caressed the now damp gusset of the beautiful craftsmanship, she heard her lover's head fall gently back against the door.

"Please..." The voice, that low, gravelly, commanding one, the one that had bewitched Sam at the bar, wrapped itself around her now, like a caress. But the commanding note was gone, and instead, it was laced with a desperation that did unspeakable things to Sam's mind and the gusset of her own panties. To have this woman up against the door, wet and pleading... Sam wondered if a person could come just from sheer awe. But before she leaned in and put her mouth on the tantalizingly wet satin, she looked up.

"I... ah... Under the circumstances... Damn it, I'm Sam, by the way, and I'm clean, if you're wondering..." Sam cursed her own lack of social graces and her inability to speak cogently in the presence of a beautiful woman.

The woman smiled slowly before raising her hand and tangling long slender fingers in Sam's certainly disheveled-by-now braid.

"I am clean, as well. And no names, darling. Names are not what this is about." The

words stung just a little bit, but the eyes, which were of an indecipherable color in the dim light of the room, scorched her, and the fingers tightened in Sam's hair directing her where she craved to be most. At the first taste, Sam forgot that little sting.

* * *

Well, now Sam certainly knew her name. Magdalene Nox. Magdalene Fucking Nox. Which was all sorts of appropriate, since Magdalene Nox had done a lot of fucking three months ago. Sam had done a lot of the aforementioned fucking too, if she said so herself. In fact, she was pretty proud that she had probably done quantitatively more of said fucking. The fact that she made the ice maven who was currently standing in front of the whole faculty come three times, pleased Sam greatly. Actually, it had pleased both of them greatly. Sam could still remember the dazed and utterly satisfied look on that angular face as Sam had risen from between her legs, licking Magdalene Fucking Nox off her lips and fingers. That look had turned ravenous on a dime, and Sam found herself on her back yet again, but not before a husky, "How can I still be hungry for you when you've sated me so many times?" reached her dazed consciousness.

It had been said with a bewildered sort of expression, almost as an afterthought. Magdalene certainly didn't think she spoke it out loud since she occupied herself immediately with thoroughly debauching Sam all over again. But the words had stayed with Sam. They kept her warm at night. And perhaps those words were what allowed her to lift her face and look Magdalene Nox straight in the eye as she stood across from her in the Mess Hall.

But the other woman did not falter, and Sam thought perhaps she didn't even recognize her at all. It had been dark in the establishment where they'd first seen each other, and where Sam had had just enough guts to send a glass of Glenmorangie to the beautiful woman sitting alone at the other end of the bar. It had also been extremely dark in the elevator they got stuck in on their way up, and Sam never did

get around to turning on the light once the elevator has been up in motion again an hour later and they'd finally made it to her small room.

The thought had not occurred to Sam before, but here she was having a stare-down match with the woman in front of whom she'd gotten down on her knees, whose panties she'd torn to shreds, shreds she'd have probably kept if she hadn't felt it was the single most creepy thing she could have done. She'd wanted to, but perhaps her deeply religious upbringing, which occasionally raised its puritanical head, or her own rather narrow-minded view on the propriety of certain things, made her carefully place the torn little scraps of satin inside the bin instead. Plus, with Sam being so deeply in the closet, surely pocketing a stranger's underwear was ill-advised. And maybe, just maybe, her one-night stand, which had featured in all her dreams ever since in full Technicolor and Dolby Surround, did not remember her.

The thought stung. Maybe even worse than the fact that Magdalene Fucking Nox had not considered her worthy of telling her her name. Well, she knew it now. And the bearer of said name had just fired her and all the people most dear to her. Orla, Joanne, Ruth. As her thoughts finally started to return to the actually important things, Sam felt that legendary temper of hers, the temper that had gotten Orla to call her the Fourth Dragon, raise its head within her.

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

Sam's inflection on the title was on purpose. She tucked the thought that she had slept with a married woman aside, but she let it be known here and now that the simple fact that Magdalene Nox was someone's wife did not mean they owed her any respect or obedience. Not yet. Not until the Board proclaimed her the new Headmistress. And then what? Sam didn't know, but she took a page out of the words that had been drilled into her by Reverend Sanderson all those years ago—faith was the substance of things hoped for and evidence of things not seen. As she leaped, throwing all her sass, all her contrariness into the indignant query, Sam held some hope that she'd

land on her feet somehow. She had nothing to lose anyway if they had indeed all been fired.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

The eyes that had rolled back so easily in complete abandon throughout that fateful—or should Sam say unfaithful under the circumstances—night three months ago, sparked with something akin to anger. Touché then.

But the moment passed as quickly as it had come, and the perfect features returned to their slightly dismissive expression. Magdalene raised an eyebrow, and her full lips stretched into a very unpleasant smile.

“It’s Headmistress. Or Magdalene, in a pinch.” The smile turned into a full-on smirk, and Sam’s jaw dropped at the obvious reference to the well-known Star Trek captain, who similarly did not brook any doubts about her authority.

Sam knew her gulp could be heard by everyone in the room. Yeah, why she’d thought she could just brazenly take on this woman, she had no idea. Her opening salvo was parried away with ease, despite the initial scored hit.

But now Sam also knew for certain that Magdalene Nox knew who she was. Sam could vividly remember blabbering about her obsession with the Voyager captain in the darkness of the elevator, stuck between the eleventh and twelfth floor of the hotel in Greenwich Village.

She had to tuck this knowledge away, though. Just for now, just until this carousel stopped spinning, and she was alone again, with her racing thoughts that made no sense. She needed her cliffs. She needed her Dragons, and yet Sam knew she’d be stuck in this suffocating hall with these hysterical people for the foreseeable future. With the walls closing perilously in on her, she bit the inside of her cheek, and the taste of copper on her tongue slowly dispelled the fog that was descending on her

mind. She needed her reasoning to be clear too, because the protagonist of her very vivid, and very hot dreams of the past three months kept speaking.

“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.”

The sharp-featured 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 Orla, but the newcomer nonetheless firmly placed a pristine document on top of the pile.

Her hand shaking visibly, looking twenty years older than her fifty-five, Orla reached for the document effectively removing her from the position she had occupied the last twenty years and that she'd given her absolute best to. Several long moments later she placed the paper 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.

In the midst of the chaos, Magdalene Nox raised a hand, and the noise died down. Sam thought that for someone just appointed to a position, she had the countenance for it down pat.

“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 stupidity, to speak directly to the new

Headmistress so far, and nobody else dared.

“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.”

* * *

Their two distinct gaits could still be heard departing, the expensive heels clacking with absolute authority on the old granite floors, followed by surprisingly faltering steps of Italian loafers that the old Headmistress favored.

The new and the old. Sam could not help but marvel at the deep contrast between the two women, which had been so strikingly on display when Orla rose to follow the new Headmistress, whose sublime, red-haired coiffe sparkled in the morning sun, her skin flawless, and her black dress accentuating her lean body to perfection. By contrast Orla, shorter and older, just looked frumpy and unkempt in yesterday’s clothes.

An apt metaphor for the new power structure, Sam thought. She watched the two figures disappear down the long corridor, red hair waving gently with every assured step. Sam could still remember how soft it was, how it had fallen on her chest as Magdalene Fucking Nox had kissed her way down her body, how it tickled her thighs as Magdalene Fucking Nox teased her and how her fingers had gripped it when Magdalene Fucking Nox’s mouth had finally devoured her. Now that she knew her name, Sam could not stop saying it in her head. It suited her so well, too.

Sam had caught herself many times, daydreaming and imagining what the name of the woman who had so thoroughly captured her thoughts might be, and yet no matter which ones she’d come up with, none of them fit. None of them had, of course, been Magdalene Fucking Nox and now that Sam knew it, she could not imagine her

mystery woman being called anything else. She felt juvenile in adding the expletive but right at this moment, with anger and fear both rearing their heads inside of her, Sam chose not to care too much. Magdalene Fucking Nox did not seem to care about Sam Threadneedle at all.

Rovington's raised voice made her return to the rather disturbing present, and she took a deep breath trying to dislodge the vividness of her reminiscing. Such an empty gesture. These memories, just like—as she was beginning to suspect—the Headmistress, were not going anywhere.

“Sam, what are we going to do?” And just like that, all eyes turned to her. She felt the weight of the world slowly descend on her shoulders. It fell seemingly gently and quietly, like a petal dropping on the face of the water, but it robbed her of her peace nonetheless.

She felt a joke on the tip of her tongue and was tempted to share it to diffuse the situation. Then she thought better of it and decided it may not be the best way to proceed here, with everyone holding their collective breaths and hanging on her next words. But being in this position held so much anxiety and so much dread for her. Not just being the center of attention, but also knowing she was the true decision-maker, the true influencer behind the collective. She almost hated her colleagues a little, as her resentment towards the situation bubbled up. Joanne, Ruth, and David were just as important in their positions as the faculty Chairs. In fact, all three held more seniority and were, for god's sake, older than her. So why was it that, when push came to shove, she was once again thrust into the thick of things?

“I think we should wait for Orla to return and for her to let us know what happens next.” She heard herself hedge for more time.

“We all know what happens next, that red-haired demon just told us what happens next! This is insulting! I have never interviewed in my life. I was courted for this job.

Courted!” Rovington waved her hands so vigorously that Sam thought she might just fly out of her leather pants altogether. Others piped up with similar outbursts, and just when the room was about to descend into chaos again, Joanne’s quiet voice sounded from the central table where she was seated.

“And for some of us, no matter how good our interview might go, there surely will be no place at Three Dragons.”

At sixty-five, and with her occasional health issues, Joanne would probably be shafted out the back door, maybe even before she had the chance to open her mouth at the interview. Certainly Ruth as well. Wasn’t it customary for the new Headmistress to saddle up her own deputy for the job? Orla had picked Ruth when she’d arrived, the older woman having been a longstanding and beloved presence at Dragons for many years, and now at seventy she barely managed to complete her duties. Sam closed her eyes and sighed, things would certainly change, and she could already feel the collective minds turning at who would not be allowed to stay.

“And I don’t think many of us made a good first impression, anyway. What with the whiskey and everything.” David’s pointed dig at Mrs. Rovington started another bout of shouting and mutual accusations. As they bickered, Joanne motioned for Sam to come closer.

“I have to say though, little one,” she smiled when Sam approached and continued to whisper, “poking the demon, to borrow Rovington’s earlier appellation, perhaps wasn’t the smartest move on your part.”

“You mean the ‘Mrs.’ jab? I am not sure why I said it.”

“That temper of yours will get you in trouble.”

Sam took the frail hand between hers and sat down near Joanne.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

“So you keep telling me. In fact, you’ve told me so almost my entire life. I have yet to see it come to pass.”

“Cocky. I watched you grow up, so don’t you sass me. Changed your diapers too. Nursed your skinned knees when you ran away to climb up those cliffs. Never listened to me back then either. Always came back with more scrapes. Listen to me now, little one. Magdalene Nox is not someone to trifle with.”

Something in Joanne’s voice made Sam seek out her kind brown eyes.

“How do you know her, Joanne? You sound like you do.”

Joanne just waved her free hand quickly, too quickly, in dismissal.

“Live long enough, work long enough in New England boarding schools for girls, and you’ll eventually know everyone, Sammy. She is renowned, and she is ruthless. You don’t rise like she did, from nothing, make a name for yourself in this business and not be absolutely deadly. ‘Demon’ may be a little harsh, but I doubt it is very much off the mark these days.”

‘These days’ had to mean that there had been other days, when the harsh moniker had been less applicable. Sam made a mental note to try and pry more out of the normally very discreet Joanne. But these were quickly becoming desperate times, and all thenormalwould have to be foregone for a while.

“You don’t think she’ll rehire you?” Sam’s heart plummeted into her stomach at the very idea. She knew Joanne had an estranged family somewhere out West. Sam

doubted very much that her mentor would have a place to go if she was forced out of Dragons. Hell, if you were completely honest, Joanne's entire life was here, at this school. She was one of the very few teachers who'd been born and bred on this island, and as a true islander, she had never left. An alumna of Dragons, she had remained at the school after she graduated, first as a teaching assistant and then as a teacher, after she'd received her diploma remotely from Boston College.

Sam had precious few people in her life whom she loved and trusted implicitly. Joanne, who had indeed helped raise the little foundling, was one of them.

"Would you rehire me, Sammy? My bouts of vertigo are not becoming less frequent with age, and I'm not young or spry anymore by anyone's measure. There are hundreds of art and photography professors who would bring so many new things to the job. You know, I believe that all things considered, Magdalene will have just done this school some good."

Again, with the inflection Joanne placed on the name, Sam sensed that there was a bit more familiarity in it than a total stranger warranted.

"What do you mean?"

"How many of us are relics here, Sammy? Too many. You and David? You are young, and you bring so much to your positions. Neither I, nor Rovington—regardless of those damn pants of hers, because they do make her ass look really good—nor Ruth have been challenged or stimulated or threatened enough in our positions for years to bring something new to the girls. To up our game, as you youngsters call it." She threw a long look at Rovington's aforementioned backside, as the PE teacher was still squaring off with David.

"First of all, eww. Quit it. This is like seeing my mother drool over someone's butt, and I do not want any of those images in my head. Plus, seriously you have to lust

after hers? It's not even that great of a behind."

"Ah, youth... Haven't you heard it said that beggars can't be choosers? I had it going on, Sammy. The stories I could tell you—"

"Oh, pfft, you may have looked, but you've never touched. Not at this school. And secondly," Sam interrupted before Joanne's favorite way of teasing her got under her skin as usual, "I can probably accept that you are right about Ruth and Rovington and maybe a few others, but you, my gross diaper changer, are still the best damn photographer I've ever seen. Talent is talent, technique is technique, and some things are not determined by your knowledge of the newest apps and gizmos. Though I have a distinct suspicion that you've kept up. The girls adore you."

Joanne discretely wiped her face, and Sam felt her own eyes water.

"You are a good girl, Sammy. Sweet, and stubborn as a mule. You're fearless, always have been. But don't go causing a ruckus for lost causes, I know you love to take those up. Think of the bigger picture here. There is so much at Dragons that is worth fighting for. And your temper and stubbornness will be needed there. Think of the students, think of the school, think of Lily and Amanda and Suzie and the rest. They will all need a champion. Don't go wasting your ammunition on me."

As valiantly as Sam was fighting tears, she felt one escape at the mention of the scholarship girls and all the things that were in danger now, all the things she'd have to fight for. Joanne's remarkably steady fingers wiped the tear and then, just as Sam was about to look away, gripped her chin and gently turned her back to meet the deep brown eyes of her mentor.

"Remember that the things that matter outweigh our attachments and our grievances. Too much is at stake here, Sam. Now, go follow them. Orla will surely need all the help she can get dealing with Magdalene Nox, with that hangover she is nursing. And

as her unofficial deputy, it's up to you anyway."

And just like that, the world on her shoulders got heavier, the petals turning into rocks, falling on the already agitated surface of her mind, sending ripples everywhere.

4

Of Eavesdropping & Sunspots

"I am claustrophobic. Ah, not much, but enough, I guess. I'm sorry. I, ah..."

Sam knew she was rambling. Her interlocutor had called it adorable when they'd exchanged quips and verbally sparred downstairs at the bar. She even said that she found it cute, how she could fluster Sam so easily with a wink or a compliment. Which was the truth, because even in the dimness of the bar, Sam could sense her own ears turning crimson. She did not feel cute or endearing. She felt clumsy. Gauche. This woman was clearly a cosmopolite, worldly, maybe a touch otherworldly even. Too good to be true. What was she doing wasting her time on someone like Sam, who was currently hyperventilating because of the enclosed space?

And yet here this woman was, on her way to Sam's room, and they were stuck in the elevator. Some luck Sam had. After her total disaster performance at the bar, Sam thought she had started to claw some points back when she'd pressed the other woman into the doors merely a second after they'd slid shut. The sound the woman made—something between a moan and growl—when their tongues touched... Sam had to admit it was one of the hottest things she'd ever experienced. But then the lights had gone out, the elevator jerked to a stop, and they were stranded between floors.

Sam could sense the impending terror and panic behind the senseless string of her

own words, confessing her phobia. It seemed tonight was just the night for all her flaws to be exposed in front of one of the sexiest women she had ever met. Not that she'd met many. In fact, she had only ever had one girlfriend, and that was in post-grad... And it all went up in smoke because Sam returned to Dragons and because Dragons meant a deep closet... And why was she thinking about all of this now anyway?

First her absolute ineptness at flirting, then her panic at being in close quarters, now the babbling... She stopped talking and sat down on the elevator's carpeted floor. If she was to pass out, the least she could do was shorten her fall from her five feet ten inches. Unbidden images of her classmates calling her a beanpole came to mind, and she bit her lip to stop the insults from being brought back to the forefront. She looked around for anything, any distraction from her present predicament, only to find the woman sitting next to her, but not too close to crowd her, and in the semi-dark, illuminated only by the emergency lights, laying her hand palm up on the floor of the elevator just within reach of Sam's own.

Slowly, perhaps a little disbelieving of her own good fortune and the generosity of this stranger, Sam placed her hand into the other woman's outstretched one. Slim fingers slid gently and loosely between hers, tethering, without restricting her. The touch centered her much more than the taste of copper on her tongue from biting her own lip.

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

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

Sam could not help the small chuckle followed by a sob, both escaping her unbidden. How humiliating. But the fingers in her grasp held hers a little firmer, squeezing reassuringly, and she focused on trying to answer and maybe talk her way out of the impending panic attack.

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

“I guess that would depend on the captain of choice.” The woman's low voice held a tinge of a smile, and Sam felt the fingers intertwined with hers relax.

“Janeway, always Janeway. Coffee and let the world burn.” For the next hour, they debated Star Trek theories and fangirled over a certain redheaded captain. The panic attack never materialized.

* * *

Spurred by Joanne's order, Sam flew up the old, wooden staircase with its expansive ornate banister, following the two women who had already made great headway down the winding corridors of the Academy. Despite her high heels, Magdalene walked briskly—the staccato of her steps echoing loudly in the empty hallways—Orla's usually much more measured steps sounding hurried, no doubt to keep up with Magdalene's longer stride. When Sam finally rounded the corner that allowed her to observe the two figures, Magdalene sped up her steps, probably simply because she could, and Sam felt a distinct pang of pity when Orla finally stopped and doubled over, dropping her hands on her thighs, breathing hard.

Magdalene halted too, a couple of steps away, watching the older woman

dispassionately. For reasons yet unfathomable to herself, Sam slipped into an alcove, unseen by the women but within clear earshot.

“Running is a bit different from running one’s mouth, isn’t it, Doctor Fenway?” Magdalene’s low voice was laced with contempt.

“If you don’t want to hear people badmouthing you, you shouldn’t hide and listen through doors.” Sam thought she’d heard a groan, as if Orla still couldn’t quite get her breath back.

“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...” Orla’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?”

Sam thought perhaps she should reveal herself. She was starting to feel distinctly uncomfortable with her own eavesdropping, seeing as she was doing exactly what Magdalene had done just minutes ago. Aside from being mostly in the wrong, Orla had one point: one rarely heard anything good about oneself, or about anyone else for that matter, by listening in.

“Look, Nox—”

“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?”

That seemed to snap Orla out of her stupor, and she appeared to finally gather enough stamina, and perhaps dignity, to lead Magdalene down the hall in the direction of the Headmistress’s office. Sam took her time, digesting what she had heard.

She felt slightly dirty and decidedly in the wrong for having piled on the woman based solely on some innuendo and rather disparaging gossip. She also knew that her own opinion of Magdalene Nox was heavily clouded by what had transpired between them in New York, and the distinct possibility that Sam had unknowingly slept with a married woman. A married woman who clearly hadn’t valued their encounter enough to even give Sam her name.

Still, Joanne was right, there was too much at stake to get bogged down by one’s hurt and bruised ego. If the earlier display was anything to go by, Orla was outclassed and outmatched by a formidable opponent, hungover or sober. As Sam approached the Headmistress’ office, the raised voices coming from inside let her know that Joanne had been right, and Orla needed help indeed.

“... I have no idea what gives you the right to throw me out like this! I want to speak with the trustees!” Sensing that Orla was a second away from being obliterated, Sam pushed the door open and stepped into the office that had been Orla’s for the past twenty years.

Aside from the abundance of macrame everywhere, Orla’s time at the helm showed in the trophies and certificates lining the walls, along with what looked like hundreds of books scattered over every available surface. Sam had always loved the cozy and lived-in atmosphere of the space, but now, with the polished and elegant Magdalene

Nox standing in the middle of it all, it felt shabby and old. Sam's mind disloyally supplied, 'like Orla,' and she wanted to slap herself. She owed the older woman everything. Surely a little loyalty was the least she could project.

"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?"

Sam could hear Orla's low growl and feared she might simply jump Magdalene at any moment. It was becoming abundantly clear that Sam should proceed immediately with the mission she'd come here to accomplish. And that wasn't ogling the way Magdalene's dress hugged her delicate shoulders and toned arms. She knew the shape of those muscles, of that sinew, how it flowed from articulation to bone, she had traced them herself, with her fingertips, with her mouth... Her face must've shown exactly where her mind had gone, for Magdalene's eyes sparkled with something akin to anger and Sam took a step forward to forestall it.

"I apologize for the intrusion. And for not knocking. I assumed that, in the ongoing ruckus, neither of you would hear me." Orla breathed in deeply, despite still glowering at Magdalene, whose lips twitched as the only reaction to Sam's opening salvo.

"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." Orla chuckled theatrically, and her shoulders sagged. A game of chess was afoot, and strategically Sam felt now wasn't the time for her to show her hand and to make it appear like Orla needed saving, even if she was clearly desperate for said salvation.

"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 dirty look Orla threw her way felt like a physical blow.

“No, Orla, you’ve had a long night and might need—” Sam did not 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.”

Sam watched with trepidation and not a little hurt and betrayal as her mentor left the hallowed space of her own office. Sure, Orla probably hurt more than most right now, with the trustees not having the grace to properly inform her of the change in her situation, of her actual dismissal, but there was no need to lash out at Sam for simply trying to help. It stung just a bit.

She still stared, dumbfounded, at the door that took the former headmistress out, when the gravelly voice behind her made her jump a foot in the air.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

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

Yes, that was the saying Joanne had taught her when she was just a little kid who'd always gotten herself in trouble on behalf of others. Judging by Orla's reaction, Sam was already being issued a one-way ticket to the underworld.

“So I'm learning.” She turned slowly, facing Magdalene. With the sun shining fully through the massive windows behind her, she was encased in light, her outline statuesque. Sam wanted to say something. Something smart or funny, something appropriate for this momentous occasion. An occasion she had fantasized about for months and thought would never come to pass - being face to face with the woman who consumed her dreams and her waking hours. Standing here, in front of her, Sam did not feel the happiness or the expected trepidation she'd envisioned. She simply felt hapless and not a little helpless. Not even naked underneath her hands and mouth, had she felt this vulnerable in front of Magdalene. Yet here she was, stripped of all her defenses in her worn flannel shirt and old Converse.

Perhaps sensing how utterly lost Sam felt, Magdalene took a step forward, only to be interrupted by the creaking of the door and Willoughby, strolling in like he owned the room—which was par for the course for the red menace that he was—unceremoniously making his way to the pillow strategically placed on the windowsill.

“Who in the world let this mongrel in?” Magdalene's voice sounded both affronted and scandalized.

“Ah, nobody really. He lives here.” Sam felt a smile tugging on her cheeks and tried

not to burst into laughter as Willoughby, in complete disregard of the potential storm brewing right next to him, stretched to his full, impressive length and promptly fell asleep on his back, all four paws up 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.”

“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?”

Now Sam’s smile came unbidden and 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, and the inelegant sound was so unexpected coming from someone of her department, Sam almost goggled.

“I assume he faithfully follows the warmest sunspots? Cats don’t belong inside. And Three Dragons doesn’t have a barn.” She strode closer to the sleeping cat, and Sam thought she would have to add poor Willoughby to the list of all the things she would be fighting for.

“With all due respect, Headmistress, he is not a barn cat. He’s one of us.”

“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 opened her mouth to argue further when the door was thrown open again, now with more force, and a lanky disheveled teenager nearly jumped past Sam to get at Magdalene. She might've succeeded, too, if Sam's reaction had been less swift.

"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."

Sam wanted to bang her head on the massive desk that stood between herself and Magdalene, who regarded the spectacle with a slightly raised eyebrow.

"And who might you be?" The words were dismissive, but the tone held a curious note that made Sam's insides clench with the anxiety of what was to come. It also made her curse Orla or Joanne or whoever it was who had gotten Lily so riled up.

"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..." Sam's admonishment fell on deaf ears as Lily continued to struggle in her grip.

"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. Are they delinquents? Usually, some sort of criminal activity is required for judicial proceedings."

There was a smile lurking in the curious eyes of the new Headmistress and Sam's own lips twitched despite the seriousness of the situation. The calm question and the prior statement took the wind out of Lily's sails, who sagged in Sam's arms in obvious relief until she realized what had just happened.

“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?” Magdalene’s tone was dry, not mocking necessarily, but it was clear she did not appreciate the interruption.

Sam closed her eyes in resignation. This was so not how she would have wanted to present the scholarship girls’ case to Magdalene. But despite the unfortunate incident, Sam felt very proud of Lily and very gratified by this kind of loyalty and support. Even under the best of circumstances, the girl’s position at Dragons had always been extremely tenuous. She’d started at the school as a legacy pupil five years ago, her mother having attended a couple of decades prior, but during her time in middle school the family’s situation changed, her father gambling away their fortune, and by the time he and Lily’s mother had declared bankruptcy, they could no longer afford tuition at Dragons. But legacy student or not, Lily had a talent that was so unique, so wonderful to behold, there was no question about ensuring she’d stay. Sam knew that Orla had worked tirelessly to adjust the budget so that a hastily cobbled together scholarship could be awarded.

On top of being talented and loyal and brave, Lily had always been an incredibly sweet child. A staunch defender of truth and a fighter of lost causes, Sam saw a lot of herself in Lily. The girl was fearless, despite having a lot to lose, since she was trans and under the new Board, and their recent inroads at turning the school back to its conservative roots, Sam worried about her continued welcome at Dragons.

While Sam wasn’t at the school when Lily had started her studies here, she knew that initially, Orla flat out hid her presence at the Academy from the trustees. Subsequently, she took it upon herself and made the unilateral decision to keep Lily at Dragons, despite the trustees’ insistence on a formal review of the overall situation

and how all scholarship girls' cases fit with the rules and procedures enshrined in the school's charter, since the document in question contained restrictive provisions regarding scholarships.

Some parents had been up in arms about these students, and Sam knew that this summer—with some new faces among the board members—was when the true battle for Lily and Amanda and Suzie and the rest of the scholarship pupils was supposed to take place. She was fully prepared to go to war for the girls, but she wanted to throttle whomever had ruined her strategy of introducing these cases slowly and carefully.

When nothing else followed the statement from the Headmistress, both Sam, and Lily in her arms stood stock-still while Magdalene looked at them, slowly moving her curious eyes from one to the other.

“Ma’am?”

“Yes, Ms. Easterly?” Magdalene's voice was again devoid of all emotion or inflection.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

“Did you really send absolutely everyone at school packing?” Lily hiccuped a sob, and Sam felt the rest of the fight drain out of the small bony shoulders under her palms.

“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.”

Brightening up a bit, Lily extracted herself from Sam’s hold, and with hastily murmured thanks and embarrassed goodbyes, made her way out of the sunlit office.

“It’s not fair, you know.”

Clearly, Sam thought, she was simply not capable of biting her tongue in the presence of this woman.

“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.” When things were put quite that plainly to her, Sam had no idea how to respond.

“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 shot back and again wondered why she was quite intent to put her foot in her mouth time and again today.

"Be that as it may."

Magdalene moved closer to the massive window overlooking the quad, and for once Sam found herself at a loss for words.

"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."

And that, as they say, answered that. She simply hadn't had the occasion to introduce herself in all the cacophony of interruptions, and Orla didn't bother in her huffy exit. But now, when faced with such a clear-cut and cruel reminder of their previous meeting, Sam felt like a speck of dirt on Magdalene's expensive four-inch heels.

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

If Magdalene was angered by the baiting, she did not show it. She just smiled that enigmatic smile of hers, that said everything without saying anything at all.

“Samantha... Lovely name.” It was becoming clear to Sam that reading this woman was going to be a challenge, her poker face being masterful, and the lack of understanding of what was going on underneath the veneer of indifference made Sam’s patience snap.

“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.”

Whatever Sam had expected the reaction to her pronouncement to be, outright laughter, that low seductive, infectious one, wasn’t quite it. Yet it was all she got.

“Touché, Sam it is then.” The strange eyes crinkled endearingly at the corners, as if saving the smile for a later moment, and Sam felt enchanted all over again. God, she truly was a completely useless lesbian, one that could not seem to find middle ground or engage in appropriate behavior, oscillating from angry to enamored in a matter of seconds.

“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?” Sam’s hand flew up to her mouth, but it was too late. The words were out, hanging between them in the air like lead for one second, before dropping to the floor and destroying whatever shaky common ground they’d been trying to build.

“My, my, you just can’t seem to help yourself, can you?” Sam hung her head to avoid the gaze that seemed to see straight into the depths of her thoughts.

“And to answer your question, no, not for... that reason.” Magdalene almost stumbled over whatever word she wanted to use for their one-night stand, but Sam thought that not much flustered the formidable woman who soldiered on.

“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.”

Sam wanted to say that she was too busy with more important things, like teaching and overseeing two hundred students, to go parading to the Governor’s Mansion for a silly photo op, but Magdalene’s eyes were looking at her with so much understanding, that all her words seemed superfluous.

“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 could only gulp and nod. As her head dropped to her chest again, she thought she heard a low, murmured, “And you and I both know I could pull off a Miranda Priestly just fine.”

Yes, they both knew it, and therein lay most of Sam’s troubles.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

The woman was stunning. Considering Sam's multiple degrees and awards, she thought she should be better equipped to describe a beautiful being in stronger and more evocative epithets than 'stunning'. However, either because of the wine she had consumed while brooding at the bar, or being her usual awkward self, Sam was completely tongue-tied and useless, as she always was around gorgeous older women. Still, awed and slightly inebriated, Sam could not bring her mind to conjure up a better description, despite it being utterly inadequate.

She was, though. Stunning and more. Her red-haired bob fell in gentle waves down to her jaw, the latter an anatomical feature that was probably illegal in several states with stricter weapons laws, for it was sharp and quite deadly in Sam's opinion. For a brief moment, she envisioned running her fingertips along it, up to the junction where it met the neck and smoothly revealed the vulnerable spot right under the ear. She'd be ticklish there, Sam decided. Then she shook her head and chuckled ruefully at herself. What a complete idiot she was, and an inappropriate one at that. She did not make a habit of ogling women or of being this disrespectful to them as to fantasize about their attributes in public.

To somehow redeem herself, at least in her own eyes, or to pay penance for being no better than half the men at the bar currently ogling the redhead, Sam signaled the bartender and requested his most expensive whiskey, since the woman seemed to be perusing the hard liquor menu and not the cocktails. The price of the glass almost made Sam's eyes water, but she just nodded, and the bartender splashed the golden liquid into a tumbler, placing it in front of the stranger with a flourish.

* * *

Standing quietly in front of a contemplative Magdalene, Sam reconsidered her strategy. Some questions needed answers, and with most of the school probably up in arms by now, gossiping, jumping to conclusions, panicking, and gunning for the new Headmistress, time was a precious commodity. So of course, instead of asking the truly important questions, Sam just had to reach for the sass and innuendo again.

“You told Lily that everyone will interview. But you’re already making an exception for me?”

It seemed her temper and the earlier established penchant to say the most insolent thing in the presence of Magdalene Nox held true despite her best intentions. She didn’t quite recognize herself. In all honesty, the awkward and tongue-tied person she’d been at the bar was her to a T, but the brazen and impertinent one? Was this displaced anger at Magdalene being married? At Magdalene not deigning to share her name? At Magdalene, seemingly completely indifferent to Sam’s presence? Either way, the swing from shy Sam to brash Sam was making actual Sam dizzy.

“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. 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. ”

Sam flinched at the unvarnished truth of her personal history being laid out this plainly at her feet. Magdalene had indeed come prepared. Sam wondered if she should stop underestimating the woman now before she embarrassed herself further. She was clearly in the presence of a consummate professional. And Sam’s history was well-documented, after all. All Magdalene had to do was go through her records, as antiquated as the school filing system was, and perhaps through some of the school’s annual reports.

“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.”

If Sam had more time she'd probably bristle at the qualification of her peers as 'inept' or herself as simply 'suitable', but that was a fight for another day. And she could not even begin to consider the war inside of her, her loyalty to Orla being what it was, despite the painful interaction they'd shared minutes ago. Sam also had to set her question about leadership acceptance aside for the moment. Clearly, Magdalene saw something or sensed something that Sam would have to ask her about later. Still, it was the last comment that got her hackles up.

“Quick, not smooth?”

Magdalene's smile was lethal.

“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 drawing sternly together at the sight of Willoughby still lounging on his pillow, stretched to his full, impressive length now, paws twitching in his sleep. It's as if he'd chosen the most impudent position possible to bask in the sun, simply to prove a point. Sam thought he was really pushing it with the new Headmistress, but could not help but smile at the audacity. She and Willoughby were birds of a feather today.

“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 finally 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.”

Something in the way that Magdalene used the school’s name tugged at Sam’s mind, and she filed it away for a time when she was both calmer, and had her wits about her. Because currently the aroma of wild jasmine and something subtle that cut through it aimed right at Sam’s senses. The scent clouded her mind and reminded her of the time she’d feasted on that pulse point, the one where she’d surely left a mark that night, on the right side of Magdalene’s neck. It was doing strange things to her brain, rendering her mental acuity useless.

“Ah, I wasn’t aware things were as dire.” Sam felt she needed to say something, if only to keep the low husky voice speaking. But before she could stop herself, she mumbled. “And you were very nice to me when you didn’t need to be.”

“I sure hope you mean the elevator and not... afterward.” Hearing Magdalene stumble over what to call their night together again, unexpectedly warmed Sam, and she couldn’t hide her smile.

“Yes, ah, the elevator. Sure. That.” Now it was Magdalene’s turn to smile.

“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.” The words were bitchy to the extreme, but the intonation was warm, and the voice settled like velvet on Sam’s skin.

Before she could answer, the door opened without a knock for the fourth time and Sam braced herself for another disgruntled colleague or student. But instead, a short, dark-haired whirlwind made her way in and gave her a bright friendly smile.

“Am I interrupting then, Headmistress?” Clearly used to the formidable presence, the waif did not seem to be intimidated by Magdalene’s glare. “I’m Georgette Leroy, and who might you be, cutie?”

She waved away the hissed, “George,” from Magdalene and extended her hand to Sam, who felt swept up by the small, joyful hurricane.

“Sam Threadneedle, ma’am.”

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

The second utterance of, “George,” from the Headmistress drew a rueful chuckle but did not deter the short woman at all.

“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.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

Sam, still reeling from the barrage of words and smiles and nicknames hurled her way, could only hold on and go along for the ride.

“Are you the welcome committee then, cutie?”

Magdalene, clearly having had enough of being barreled over, made an impatient gesture that looked like a royal wave, and despite her earlier exuberance and clear, complete disregard for her boss’ position, George immediately fell silent.

“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 outrage could have probably been more honest if she herself had not felt that Roger should have gotten the boot a long time ago. Lazy, slow, and utterly derelict in his duties, Roger had departed the Academy the second the last bell signaling the end of the school year had rung. Come to think of it, Sam had never seen him stay until the actual end of his workday or come to work on time. While all of the above was bad, it was his sloppiness that grated on Sam the most.

She peered around George and saw the small space outside the Headmistress’ office. As usual, Roger’s desk was piled high with papers and files, and even a couple of undoubtedly dirty mugs. Clearly, he had been in too big of a hurry to clean up before he left for his vacation. Not for the first time, Sam wondered how many of her own carefully written and absolutely urgent requests were lost in the quagmire of Roger’s

nonexistent filing system. Was this why she had never gotten approval for the trip to MIT that she had wanted to take with the juniors? The probability was pretty high that her request and estimates were simply lost or had coffee spilled over them, as half the papers on the desk seemed to.

She turned around, thinking her move had been stealthy enough, but Magdalene was regarding her with that all-knowing expression, clearly having followed her gaze, and probably reaching pretty much the same conclusion. She raised an eyebrow. Sam bit her lip. The eyebrow climbed just a touch higher and the corner of that sensuous mouth twitched.

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

“Well, I’m glad you approve, Ms. Threadneedle.” The words were infused with sarcasm, and really, it should not be as attractive as it was, but Sam couldn’t help but find it alluring. She had a war to fight. She had a school to protect. Yet here she was being swept up in the scents and sounds and the sheer elegance of the presence of Magdalene Nox. George gave her a long look before winking at her, obviously having caught Sam staring. Sam closed her eyes and prayed that that was the extent to which the other woman had figured her out. Because if anyone could glean her true thoughts, she’d be in deep trouble indeed. Her closet was getting more transparent by the minute with Magdalene’s presence on the island.

Magdalene, seemingly already having dismissed Sam from her mind if not from her sight, proceeded to slowly peruse the equally messy desk in front of her. Sam suddenly felt embarrassed for Orla. Couldn’t she have left the school’s affairs in better shape? She spied a half-eaten donut among the student files and could feel her cheeks catch flame. How was Sam supposed to defend anything when she was faced with things like this? As if on cue Willoughby raised his head, stretched, and with deadly precision honed in on the donut on the desk, coiling for the leap from the windowsill. At the last moment, as if sensing that he was in the presence of a much

bigger predator, he turned his head to Magdalene, giving her a beseeching look and a rather pitiful meow. The Headmistress simply raised the file that was half obscuring the donut and nodded, her face a grimace of disgust.

One heavy leap later and Willoughby proceeded to loudly chew on his stale prize. He did not seem to mind. Sam could feel her cheeks turn an even deeper shade of crimson, her humiliation on behalf of her mentor complete.

Magdalene shuddered and turned to Sam who was nearly shaking with embarrassment, and to George who looked positively joyful, hiding her snicker behind a cough.

“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.” But George’s voice did not sound regretful at all, in fact, there was a lot of schadenfreude mixed in, and it looked like she was holding back another snicker.

Sam looked questioningly between the two women, and George moved closer to murmur conspiratorially.

“This one’s ex-husband is among the crowd. Good times ahoy, matey.”

“George!” And this time the tone was sharp as a whip, brooking no argument and leaving no doubt about how upset Magdalene was. Whether at the fact that George was disclosing decidedly personal information and being cavalier with a complete stranger, or at the presence of her ex-husband on the premises, Sam could not know. But the remark still left her slightly lightheaded with relief. Ex-husband.Ex. Sam

breathed with her whole chest for the first time since she'd realized she might have inadvertently participated in a rather sordid act of adultery. Or was it because she still had all this absolutely obvious attraction toward Magdalene and it was disconcerting to her that she would lust after a married woman? If Sam was honest with herself, it was more the latter than the former, but she thought that it was good of her to cling to some morals under the circumstances.

George's tone was suitably chagrined when she spoke up again. "Apologies, Madam Headmistress. I believe there was talk of assembling at 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."

"The Headmistress' personal facilities are right there on the left." The words were out of Sam's mouth before she could think about them. "I mean, ah, if Headmistress Nox doesn't mind you using them..."

With a wave of her hand and a little nose twitch, that, as Sam was coming to understand, indicated dismissal or displeasure, Magdalene made to exit the office. Sam stood rooted to the spot, exchanging a 'what in the hell just happened?' look with the now sated cat, who'd resumed his place on the lingering sunspot on the windowsill.

"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." Sam jumped guiltily and hurried after the departing Magdalene, who simply strode away as if she had not spoken. She could swear, if Willoughby was capable of laughing he'd be doing it right now, as he looked at her with a distinct twinkle from his bicolored eyes.

* * *

By the time Sam and Magdalene had made their way back through the winding corridors, the Mess Hall was full of people. On the stage normally reserved for the Headmistress and her closest faculty members, sat nine people. The differences among them were rather grotesque in their starkness. Sam thought that if she wanted to pick a group who looked or acted nothing alike, she'd be hard-pressed to look any further than the Three Dragons Board of Trustees. Young, old, sickly, in perfect health, the group couldn't have been more diverse in looks. Their only similarities, she knew, lay within how rich and powerful they were. Usually, the trustees were bankers, trust fund managers, and heirs or heiresses, most of them ran multi-million dollar empires during the day and played at charity on the weekends.

Sam assumed that being a trustee on a board of a private school was somewhat of a chore, rather than a gainful and prestigious occupation. Sure, it looked good on their resumes, that they volunteered their time to oversee the finances and the smooth running of one of New England's oldest and proudest, if recently shabbiest, schools—although Magdalene's revelation of the state of ruin of the endowment still floored Sam. But it also must have proven to be a bit of work for them, especially lately, and most of their faces showed they wanted to be anywhere but on this piece of land torn from the continent by the rebellious ocean thousands of years ago.

Sam took a seat next to Joanne, with Orla very demonstratively sitting next to one of the oldest and most distinguished trustees. Stanton Alden, whom Sam knew to be a direct descendent of one of the passengers of the Mayflower, looked particularly weary. Sam was better acquainted with him than with the rest of the board members since he was the longest-serving trustee. He had been there when they had decided to keep a child that had been found on the steps of the Academy during one of the worst winters on record, that had cut the island off the mainland for months. He, along with Fredrick Tullinger, who'd passed away last year, had served as her *de jure* guardians throughout her childhood and teenage years. *De facto*, Sam was raised at Dragons with Joanne—and later Orla—acting as her actual guardians and minders. It pretty much took the proverbial village, but she'd made it. From a foundling on the steps of

the school chapel to Math Chair in a little under thirty years.

Since Sam had never gotten into too many scrapes and exceeded the seemingly meager expectations that were placed on her by her guardians—she remembered Tullinger once telling her that Alden and he only wished for her to stay out of trouble—there'd been no need for either of her de jure guardians to interfere in her life. She'd gotten birthday cards from both the Alden and Tullinger families, as well as some kind of present for Christmas each year, but that had been the extent of their interactions.

With Fredrick Tullinger's passing, his son Joel had taken his place on the Board. Looking nothing like his cheerful and ever-merry—if not always sober—father, Joel sat imposingly to Alden's left. Sam had really only spoken to him at length once before. They'd gotten into a bloody fistfight the one time a then-teenaged Sam had been invited to spend Christmas with the Tullinger family on their massive estate in Cambridge. She'd broken Joel's nose back then, and their relationship had not improved over the years. They mostly stayed out of each other's way when they had to cross paths, which was extremely rare.

Sam did not know most of the other trustees, some of them never showing their face on the island. Still, they looked distinguished and polished. She thought that the cost of their getups and jewelry alone could probably solve the school's funding problem for the next year. The person who drew Sam's eyes the most was the man in his forties sitting at the very end of the row. She'd have noticed him anyway, as he had an extremely elegant bearing and a kind of hauteur that people of certain breeding had about them. But the fact that Magdalene took a seat next to him caught Sam's attention right away.

Handsome, blond and draped in a bespoke suit that Sam thought was probably worth more than her monthly salary, the man did not seem to care for the crowd in front of him; he had eyes only for the woman to his right. And if Sam was completely honest,

and she tried to be—at least with herself—he had beautiful eyes, damn his hide. Deeply blue, they rivaled the sapphires sparkling on the cufflinks on his wrists. Of course, he had sapphires on his wrists, of course. He said something, and even from her seat, Sam could tell that he did it deliberately quietly enough for Magdalene to lean closer to hear. Then he laid a regal, well-manicured hand on the Headmistress' forearm in a gesture that spoke of possession and prior intimacy, and Sam had to grit her teeth. Next to her, Joanne chuckled, clearly following Sam's gaze.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

“Still randy that one. Timothy Nox. He’s aged well. Though Magdalene looks better, in spite of them being the same age. Not sure if it’s the red hair or her natural beauty, but in comparison, he looks much older and somewhat too made up. Like the plastic surgery, while well done, wasn’t entirely necessary. Call me sexist, but I don’t understand why he needed it.”

Sam wanted to say that she didn’t care and to turn away from Joanne, but she knew her guardian had a keen eye for faces, being a skilled photographer. If anyone, Joanne would see things that Sam would not be able to. Plus, she clearly had a ton of gossip about the couple. Sam made a mental note to question her more. On second thought, she wondered why she cared so much. George had already revealed that Magdalene was divorced. Her personal status did not matter and should not matter to Sam. Magdalene had made it crystal clear during their time together that it was a one-night stand.

But something in Sam kept tugging her attention back to the couple sitting close to each other on the stage, with one of them staring dispassionately ahead at the faculty assembled, and the other caring not a jot about anyone else in the room but the person next to him.

Finally, when it seemed everyone who was still at the school had assembled, Joel Tullinger rose from his place and approached the podium, looking pointedly at the crowd in front of him. Sam thought his father used to do this much better. Authority sat awkwardly on Joel’s shoulders. Like he desperately wanted it, but the fit chafed.

“Esteemed faculty and students of Three Dragons Academy. We have gathered here to celebrate the end of another school year. I do not say that it was a successful one.”

At his words, Orla bristled visibly, and Sam could see Alden lay a quelling hand on her shoulder.

Throwing the former headmistress a pointed look, Joel went on.

“It is not a secret to the trustees that the school has been underperforming for years. Moreover, some practices enshrined by our forefathers in the Academy’s charter have fallen by the wayside. The proud principles this school has embodied for centuries are being swept aside in order to provewokenessand relevancy, and to pursue newfangled trends and a liberal agenda.”

The faculty and the scholarship students, who had nowhere else to go and hence would be boarding at the school for the summer, collectively held their breaths. Joel might as well have added ‘homosexual agenda’, the way he spat out the syntagm. Sam could see clearly where he was headed with his little speech.

“We will not allow this illustrious institution to fall prey to the things this entire country is struggling to temper.” He took a long swig from the glass on the podium, as if his speech had made him severely dehydrated, and surveyed those in front of him with the air of a tyrant commanding his people.

“With all that being said, the trustees felt it was time to make a belated change. We don’t yet know if the school is still within anyone’s power to save, its finances being what they are and the endowment depleted. But if anyone can steady this ship before we assess the sustainability of the Academy and its ability to continue to function past next summer, it’s the new Headmistress - Ms. Magdalene Nox. We have full faith that Headmistress Nox will put a stop to the foolishness that has been allowed to flourish at Three Dragons, to the malicious and insidious emblems that have been corrupting the student body, and to the potentially harmful curricula tendencies. She has succeeded at many other schools in New England, cutting the fat, streamlining the educational process and returning the institutions to all their former glory. I give

you your new Headmistress.” He turned to where Magdalene was sitting and demonstratively started to clap.

If he or Magdalene expected people to follow him in his applause, they were mistaken. Unlike Timothy Nox and the trustees, the faculty and students did not move. Sam thought that, after what they had just heard, they might as well all stand up and leave. Three Dragons had largely been a secular school for over three decades, and even before that—despite a charter that dated back two centuries, to a very religiously influenced beginning—the school had always been moving away from morning and evening prayers as well as other kinds of religious practices. If Magdalene Nox was being brought in to re-instill practices from the 19th century, she was about to fail. Sam would see to it. And what kind of gall did someone have, to suddenly oppose the alluded-to homosexual agenda after doing decidedly homosexual things to Sam in New York?

Sam fumed, the muscles of her jaw working, and looked defiantly at the woman who stood in front of the crowd, whose eyes betrayed absolutely nothing. If this was a moment of triumph, her pale countenance showed no elation. She simply surveyed those before her and nodded.

Joel looked at the Headmistress in puzzlement, perhaps waiting for her to say something, to pontificate as he had done, but when nothing was forthcoming, he took his seat too.

The silence that loomed over the Aula Magna was ominous, and Sam felt a shiver run down her spine. Joanne’s trembling hand was in hers and the grip was like iron. Several seats away from her she could see Lily holding Amanda’s hand, her eyes defiant. In fact, the girls were showing remarkable resoluteness in the face of adversity, unlike the adults in the room. They were certainly showing more bravery than Sam, whose thoughts were consumed with fear. Could she stand up for the students without revealing who she was? With Joel clearly pushing for a return to the

roots, would she even have a place at Dragons if her being a lesbian were revealed? Sam closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Selfishness had never been a characteristic of hers. She hoped when push came to shove, the Fourth Dragon would find her courage.

Orla's cheeks were wet. Sam gritted her teeth again and ruefully shook her head. Now was not the time to cry over things that they could no longer change. Now was not the time to show weakness and despair. Orla was their leader. She should at least try to act like it, instead of succumbing to tears. So she had lost her position as headmistress, but she was still one of the faculty, previously holding the English Chair. She could still try to interview and fight for the school.

Sam's disappointment at the situation and at Orla displaying such obvious weakness must have shown on her face, because when she turned her head, her eyes ran dead straight into the dark, unwavering stare of the new Headmistress. She felt a charge of electricity run between them, but she refused to lower her gaze. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the eyes crinkled slightly at the corners and the lush lips twitched with something Sam thought was approval.

6

Of Legal Protections & Tailored Suit Skirts

Sam lived and breathed words. She'd read extensively—some would say excessively, if that was even a thing—her whole life, and despite being a math teacher, believed that words held inherently more power than anything else in the universe, including numbers, or looks, or scents... So how was it that, without a single word, the woman across from her at the bar had captivated her beyond reason?

Not a total stranger to women—she did have that one girlfriend in post-grad, dammit—and not exactly sheltered after a life in an all-girls school and then in one of

the best colleges in New England, Sam did not consider herself either a hermit or a nun, yet here she was, mouth dry, hands clammy, tongue-tied without a single word being uttered.

Was it the graceful line of neck, exposed by the generously unbuttoned blouse? Sam wondered if the woman had unbuttoned it before stepping into the bar as a signal of her intentions, or was it simply the end of a long workday and it was a concession to tiredness? Either way, the line drew Sam's eyes with a steady, undeterrable magnetic force. In her mind's eye, Sam saw her own fingertip trace it from below the ear to where the cotton of the shirt obscured its transcendence to the shoulder. Would the woman blush? Would goosebumps chase Sam's finger? Would the skin be warm already? Or would it heat at her touch? So many questions. Sam's scientist mind was spinning already. Or was it simply this woman, who hadn't said anything, yet had captivated Sam more than any other in a very long time?

Silences weren't a thing Sam found attractive. They were usually heavy and charged, and yet the fact that this woman hadn't needed to utter a word to make the rest of the bar simply fade away, was a new and fascinating experience. Her looking at Sam with a curious and at the same time knowing gaze had Sam shivering in the warmth of the room. Maybe Sam was a new convert to the miracle of silence, because for the first time in her life she had no desire to fill it with anything. Silence was enough, and under the twinkling of the wondrous eyes, Sam felt enough herself.

* * *

The next week proved to be taxing beyond anything Sam had ever endured at work, and she wished for some of that silence, if only to catch her breath and to steady herself. She needed to clear her mind, and so she did the one of the things that still brought her clarity - she went for a run.

Mentally, she was doubly exhausted. On one hand, Joel's pronouncements had hit

just a little close to home for Sam. Despite Magdalene's assurances, and in spite of her own set of quite impressive accomplishments for her age and her humble beginnings, Sam had never been more aware of being gay in a workplace than right now. Her closet had been rather firmly shut for years, with Joanne the only person aware of its existence, but with Magdalene on the island and having both hands-on experience and first-hand knowledge—she cracked herself up with those idiotic puns at times—about who Sam was, the safe, if not always comfortable closet, was less and less secure.

Sure, the Supreme Court's decision a year prior stated that an employer that discriminates against someone simply because they are gay or transgender breaks the law, and she felt safe in her position, but Sam's heart was still heavy. It was a unique experience for her.

During Orla's tenure, Sam had felt comfortable enough. In fact, she often thought that coming out would have probably been a good idea, since she felt so secure. But for a myriad of reasons she never had. She tried once, at their evening brainstorming teas at Orla's, but every time she'd open her mouth, the words would not come out. The pun and the irony.

So she never did open up her closet to Orla or to anyone else on the island bar Joanne, but if she was completely honest with herself, the reason for that was her refusal to be othered. Because no matter where she went, she had always been seen as different. First, as the only orphan attending Dragons, then as—to her knowledge—the only teen at school who did not dream of boys. If there were other gay students—and statistically there should have been—Sam never knew of them, and Dragons, led by Reverend Sanderson and his fire-and-brimstone speeches against all things sinful, did not encourage the queer girls to come out.

Years went by, and it wasn't like her prospects of finding anyone on an island as small and as conservative as Dragons were actually real, and so Sam had kept her

secret. Until now.

To be suddenly thrown into so much uncertainty by the man she had a rather bloody history with, made her angry and grated beyond belief. Joel's intention to return the school back to the 19th century was frightening.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

So when she'd been officially informed of her re-hiring and signed the new contract, she hadn't expected it to be an experience akin to putting on a bulletproof vest, but she certainly felt that way. Bulletproof. Protected. After a couple of tough days, the anxiety subsided. Which made her even angrier. The trustees, and Magdalene too, of all people, were set to destroy a safe space. A space where people like her, like Amanda, like Lily, like Suzie—whether silent and closeted or loud and proud—had found a home, a refuge from the world that was, by and large, still unkind if not downright cruel to people like them.

On the other hand, Magdalene's proximity, which had been so easy in the darkness of the bar, was throwing Sam off her game, making her feel discombobulated and in a state of constant awareness that had none of the fateful night's ease.

The Headmistress had indicated that Sam's interview itself was only pro forma, and all things considered, it went smoothly and quickly. But even with the ink dry on the contract, Sam still felt like she had gone ten rounds with the heavyweight champion in the ring.

For that was what Magdalene seemed like. After years of working with Orla in a friendly, relaxed, and dare she say less-than-professional atmosphere, filled with cupcakes and muffins and parties, Sam felt completely run over by the efficient and utterly effective machine that was Magdalene Nox. No nonsense, on time, and highly organized, in those four-inch heels and that tightly tailored skirt suit, she was the epitome of attractive, deadly professionalism.

The outfits did decidedly marvelous, if slightly dirty, things to Sam's psyche. They were distracting; they were maddening; they were wonderful. The way the downright

respectable, knee-length skirt would hug those hips and ride up just an inch when Magdalene sat down... Sam drank a lot more water than usual these days, as her throat was perpetually parched. She knew she was being the utter embodiment of a lovesick puppy, lusting after her very professional and aloof boss, but she had no idea how to stop it.

It also became clear very soon that Sam wasn't the only one with a less-than-well-hidden admiration for their new Headmistress. Timothy Nox and Joel Tullinger had both stayed behind under the pretense of helping her organize the school's affairs and setting her up for success. Sam felt that Magdalene herself resented the intrusion. She was more than capable of conducting the interviews and the audit of the files and books by herself, and yet she was forced to contend with the presence of two people who were entirely overbearing and—especially in Joel's case—downright condescending.

Still, Magdalene did not allow either Timothy or Joel to steal her show. She ruled with a steady hand, and after having aced her own interview and being officially made a member of the transition committee—along with the two trustees and George—Sam had the unique opportunity to observe how, despite keeping her cards very close to her chest, the Headmistress was making the job all her own.

Joel had tried to insert himself repeatedly in either the interviews or the oversight of the audit, but had been gently yet firmly put in his place. Timothy's role was less clear to Sam, as the man was mostly absent from the actual duties he was supposed to be performing, either on the phone or hiding away in the quarters assigned to him in the dormitories. One time he even brought a book to the office. David, whose interview he was crashing in such a manner, had goggled at the sheer audacity. So, to say that Timothy didn't appear to be at all interested in the school's affairs was an understatement. His level of interest in Magdalene, however, was another story altogether. He was effusive in his attentions and his compliments and his not-so-subtle touches. Which grated on Sam so much, she couldn't find it in herself to even

attempt to reason the anger away.

But while Timothy's commitment to the school's causes was clearly faked or tenuous at best, Sam could not find fault with his intelligence or ingenuity. Even being thoroughly distracted by his phone, or his book, or his ex-wife, as well as a myriad of other things, Timothy Nox was brilliant when called upon. His knowledge of accounting and finances shone brightly when the school's dire straits in terms of funding were fully exposed. He was helpful, he was insightful and he had very good ideas.

And he did all these things while looking like an expensive fashion model, fresh off the runway. His clothes immaculate, his watch opulent and cufflinks always on point, Sam felt downright drab in comparison, and if not for an unexpected ally, she'd have perhaps had a more difficult time dealing with this veritable prince among men.

Since George had started at Dragons, she and Sam had become if not exactly close, then definitely situationally friendly. Not only were they the only ones on the transition committee not dressed in thousand-dollar outfits, but she and the secretary seemed to share a decidedly irreverent attitude towards both Joel and Timothy and had developed a way of discretely rolling their eyes towards each other when either of the men fawned over Magdalene too overtly.

And Timothy did fawn. In fact, he was pretty brazen about it. And while his excessive platitudes were unpleasant, it was his flirting that drove Sam to distraction.

George joked about how Timothy could use a bib to save all those crisp, starched Hugo Boss shirts from all the drooling he did over Magdalene, but Sam did not find those jokes even remotely funny. In fact, the secretary's cracks about Timothy had just enough bite to veer into disrespectful, if not downright 'I hate this man's guts' territory. After all, George seemed like a very loyal friend to the Headmistress and was clearly on her side when it came to her ex-husband.

Moreover, Sam suspected that Magdalene herself wasn't having much fun either. She bore the effusive attention and overt displays of affection with dignity, but Sam could tell by that barely-there twitch of her nose and the narrowing of her expressive eyes, that she was not pleased with either the presence of her ex-husband on the grounds or with his demonstrative overtures.

Sam was also beginning to understand that trying to read Magdalene was every bit as difficult as she thought it would be. For all of Sam's literary knowledge, she still couldn't find an apt metaphor for her. A closed book she was not, because she wasn't entirely standoffish or abrupt, always available to a colleague or a student. So the book was rather open, but the pages were entirely blank, and at no time could Sam tell what she was really thinking—despite the occasional cute nose twitch.

Cute? Her exhausting run over, Sam raised the midriff of her hoodie to wipe the sweat from her face, shook her head at herself, and sat down on a patch of grass on the Amber Dragon Cliff, her usual nightly place to unwind and simply get away from the world.

But as she made herself comfortable, she discovered she wasn't alone in her hiding place. A few feet away, closer to the edge, a familiar figure stood in the shadows, under the pine trees. Her posture ramrod straight, Magdalene looked like the brooding hero of a gothic romance, in a black dress, her shoulders covered by a light flowing shawl, protecting her from the evening breeze. Her face was shadowed, but Sam sensed that, despite the tense set of her arms around her body, her features were peaceful.

She could understand that. Dragon Cliffs accomplished what no other place on Earth could. They brought solace and ease to Sam, no matter how dire the circumstances were. They'd certainly calmed and eased the mind of a rebellious and misfit teenager for years. They had been home when no other home existed.

In her musings, she must've made a sound, for Magdalene turned suddenly, her gaze sharp and defensive, before relaxing a bit at the sight of Sam, who felt an entire herd of butterflies in her stomach at such an overt display of acceptance. After a full week of not being able to tell where she stood with her, it was akin to a kiss to realize that, despite everything that had happened between them, Magdalene was in fact comfortable around her.

“You’ve found my little hidey-hole, Professor Threadneedle.”

It was still a bit of a rush how seamlessly Magdalene had gone from calling her Ms. Threadneedle to Professor, always underscoring her now fully affirmed position at the school. It also set a heavy boundary between them, for the Headmistress had never called Sam by her first name. But the title also allayed all of Sam’s lingering fears and doubts about who she was and how secure her position was. She wondered if Magdalene was intuitive enough to have sensed Sam’s worry earlier, when she'd felt like she may no longer be safe at Dragons. She wouldn’t put it past this woman who, while still an enigma, seemed to have everyone else figured out.

She hadn’t asked Sam anything and they had not exchanged a word beyond their school duties, but for some reason—be it the mutual assured destruction principle, or just foolhardy faith—Sam felt that Magdalene would not out her. Also, the knowledge that Sam was privy to something exceedingly personal to the enigmatic woman, something that nobody else seemed to have any inkling about—such as Magdalene’s own sexuality—was reassuring to Sam. She’d never use it against the Headmistress, but it felt like having this shared secret was akin to holding a small fragile bird to one’s chest. One needed to be gentle and oh-so-careful with it, but it was wondrous and beautiful and worth all the trouble in the world.

Sam’s breath caught in her throat as Magdalene stepped even closer to the jagged edge of the cliff and then, just as abruptly, turned her back to the foaming ocean beneath.

“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.”

“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.” The small smile playing on Magdalene’s lips warmed Sam to the core.

“Yep, adrenaline junkie - that’s me. Bungee jumping and paragliding and skydiving. All those things. Ask anyone.” Sam hid her own sarcastic smile behind the neckline of her hoodie.

“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?”

Sam blushed furiously and hid her whole face in the generous folds of her three-sizes-too-big top. She was almost certain that Magdalene was alluding to their one-night stand, yet she was so embarrassed that her peers had chosen such boring and downright dowdy descriptors for her, that she wanted the cliff to swallow her whole. She was desperate to impress this woman, and the people around her seemed determined to make her look like a country bumpkin.

And the way Magdalene’s voice had lowered at ‘one exception’, made Sam’s heart speed up. The things she could do to Sam with just her tone alone were downright unfair.

“You spoke to our colleagues about me?”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

This seemed to be the only safe question to ask, considering that Sam wasn't sure she was ready to bring up their night together. The last time she did, Magdalene had simply waved it away like it was nothing, and Sam wasn't ready to have what had been a transformative experience for herself dismissed or diminished yet again.

"I hired you, Professor, I had to check references." Now Magdalene's lips no longer tried to hide her smile, and it blossomed, transforming her entire face. The normally carefully neutral features were alight with pleasure and mirth.

Magdalene came closer, and despite her expensive dress made to sit down in the grass. Sam scrambled up and took off her hoodie, spreading it on the ground.

"Chivalrous to a fault." The smile was gone, but the words held the remnants of the warmth it had been infused with moments ago.

"That dress is a work of art, it would be a shame to ruin it."

"Dry cleaners exist even in this godforsaken place." Now, these words were less than warm. Sam felt a certain unexplained resentment which had, in the past week, been spilled by the Headmistress on some things that pertained to the island. From the inconvenience of the ferry to the trustees who were 'helping smooth the transition', to the cat who still continued to roam the school despite Magdalene's decree that 'strange animals' should not be allowed inside.

"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.”

Magdalene’s lips quirked upwards, and Sam sighed. Apparently, unlike her, Magdalene could read Sam like a book. Was this really a surprise though? She’d done so from that fateful moment their eyes had met over the dim lighting in that Manhattan bar.

Sam looked out on the deceptively calm waters, ready to turn stormy and angry in a heartbeat, and pondered how much to reveal. Still, she was aware that most of her story had been well-documented in her student file and was—with Magdalene’s propensity for knowing everything about everyone well beforehand—probably not a secret to her.

“I’m sure you’re familiar with my history at Dragons. Well, as much of it as is reflected in documentation...” At Magdalene’s faint nod, Sam swallowed convulsively, still overwhelmed by how raw the wounds of her childhood were.

“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.”

Sam gave Magdalene a rueful smile but was met with nothing but a stony glare, whether at her behavior or at Alden’s total lack of interest in the actual events that had preceded the altercation, Sam couldn’t tell.

“That’s okay though. 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.’”

Not wanting to witness pity or sympathy, Sam turned away sharply, pretending once again to find the waves captivating. After taking a few calming breaths, she chanced a look at Magdalene’s face only to find it thunderous. Sam felt that she perhaps shouldn’t have been so concerned that she’d be pitied. It was clear that the Headmistress was a staunch disciplinarian and probably found her childhood antics to be less than pitiable or amusing. Or was she perhaps upset for her? Sam wanted to laugh at herself for even entertaining the notion.

“I bet you’d have expelled me for fighting, Headmistress.”

A shadow crossed Magdalene’s face, and for a second Sam thought she’d gleaned something underneath the careful veneer, but it was gone as soon as it had arrived.

“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, gazing steadily down at the ocean, its rhythmic motion seemingly hypnotizing her. Whether or not she used the waves as Sam did earlier—to gather her thoughts or stall for time—Sam did not know.

“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.”

Sam swallowed the lump that had suddenly formed in her throat.

“This school is her entire life.”

Sam had no idea why she was pleading. So far nobody had managed to overrule any of Magdalene’s decisions. She had summarily dismissed both Ruth Trufault and Jen Rovington, and Sam knew the Academy had advertised their positions faster than her former colleagues had managed to vacate their quarters. For some reason, she had not expected that Orla would follow their fate. She might not have entirely succeeded as a headmistress, as Sam was starting to realize little by little every day, but she was a talented and beloved teacher. Her students adored her. Her approach to teaching was innovative and captivating. Sam had assisted with several of her classes and was left utterly enchanted by the atmosphere in the room and the methods.

“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.”

But Sam could also see the other side of the coin. She knew intimately, from all the evenings spent in consultations, brainstorming, and discussions with Orla, that she’d operated under the worst conditions for years, with little to no support from the trustees. And Sam also knew that despite all that, the school had not folded. It persevered and continued to offer home and board to those most in need.

“I think it’s easy to cast stones post-factum, Headmistress.” Sam knew her tone sounded shrill, but she couldn’t help herself.

“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 previous anger returned in full force. Yes, she was fully aware that it was standard practice to check references. But Magdalene had told her repeatedly that she would be hired, only to be vetted like everyone else. Or did it upset her because she was treated like everyone else, after what the two of them had shared? Sam knew she wasn't being fair, she knew she was being rather bratty about the whole thing, but their personal situation aside, Magdalene was systematically dismantling everything Orla and Joanne and Sam herself had built in recent years. And that hurt just as much. She'd analyzed to hell and back which pain was stronger and for what reasons.

And that last dig about knowing some of her qualities? That one was just a punch below the belt when Sam was trying to concentrate on the school and not on all the things she'd been very good at during that night in Manhattan.

“I would appreciate it if we kept this professional, Headmistress.” At Magdalene's raised eyebrow and another subtle nod, Sam went on, “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.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

“Well, direct and honest were mentioned as well.” Before Sam could explode into another outburst of outrage, Magdalene waved her away and her eyes lost the playful sparkle.

“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.”

Sam jumped to her feet and stalked away, trying to grab a better hold on her fraying temper.

“Orla Fenway has kept Dragons alive while those people you seem to bow to did nothing to help her!”

Magdalene’s cold, angular features arranged themselves into a downright malicious smile. “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 at her own outburst, but she felt like a runaway train now, unable to stop. This seemed to have become a recurring theme where this woman was concerned. Sam simply couldn’t help herself.

“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.”

“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.”

“With all due respect, Headmistress, screwcomfortable, these children deserve an education, and housing, and the best things we can provide for them.”

“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!” Sam felt like she wanted to hit her head against the side of the cliff. This woman was maddening, purposely obtuse, and lacking all empathy. “These girls are a miracle, each and every one of them.”

Sam paced away, trying to get her ragged breathing under control.

“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 not to blush since trying not to stammer was obviously not an option. "Yet you push all this sanctimony on us all. How do you sleep at night?"

"I sleep just fine, Professor." Infuriatingly, Magdalene said nothing else as she rose from the now soiled hoodie, and Sam thought that was one hell of a perfect metaphor for what was happening at the school and in her life. Sam had offered Magdalene something out of the goodness of her heart, only to have it returned dirtied and ruined. But she thought that, just as her time on the transition committee had been volunteered, so was her hoodie, and at the end of the day, she had nobody to blame but herself.

"What will you do?" Sam felt her rage drain from her, leaving her slightly lightheaded.

"Whatever is required. Whatever those before me felt was too hard to do." With those words, she turned on her completely unsuitable but thoroughly sexy heels and strolled back to the Academy. Sam did not follow.

7

Of Trouble Brewing & Revelations About Things Long Past

Sitting alone in the dim light of a bar sipping a substandard glass of cabernet was not all that it was hyped up to be. At least two men had already made a pass at her, and she felt exposed and uncomfortable. Books and movies really romanticized the hell out of this utterly dreary experience. She wasn't a drinker, and she couldn't for the life of her fathom how people did this night after night.

Maybe if she had company. But she was alone in New York, having begged and

borrowed and cajoled and pretty much bent over backward to make sure Orla found at least the pitiful funding for a train ticket and the participation fee to get her to this conference. Fate had it, that out of all the events she could have spent the pitiful travel allowance on, Sam ended up attending one of the most useless ones. Either due to poor organization or lack of insights from normally very interesting presenters, the conference was a total wash. So after wasting her time and the school's money, Sam was down in the hotel bar, drowning her sorrows as countless pop-culture references had advised her to. So far she had found nothing but boredom and trouble.

A whiff of wild jasmine—a scent that had no place among the dank and bitter smells of the bar—reached her as a presence materialized by her side, and within a second she was looking into the most peculiar eyes, a deep aquamarine with a brilliant amber ring around the iris. ‘Central iris heterochromia at its most beautiful,’ was the last thing that crossed Sam's mind before she lost all capacity for thought. If the eyes were remarkable, their owner was downright astounding. As the woman took a seat at the bar, it occurred to Sam that perhaps some of those pop-culture references were right after all. When the bi-colored eyes twinkled at her over the liquor menu, Sam knew that whatever trouble she had encountered before had nothing on the trouble she was in from here on in.

* * *

The Dragons were in trouble. Orla was in trouble. Joanne and the scholarship girls were in trouble. Sam was in trouble. Everything around her was changing with the speed of light, and she could barely hold on for the ride. Every day she joined the transition committee for the morning meeting to discuss the day's plans. And every day new, absolutely ruinous—to Sam's thoughts—plans were brought up. The only one spared so far was David, who, despite being made to endure a particularly grueling interview process, had gotten his position as History Chair back. Sam knew about this because her colleague had pulled her aside rather excitedly and hugged the stuffing out of her, just before they got caught in the rather awkward embrace by both

Magdalene and George. The former frowned disapprovingly and the latter wiggled her eyebrows before whispering, “Young love, you go, Sam and David!” and hastily followed Magdalene out the door. Sometimes—whether in her personal or professional life—trouble found Sam, even when she had nothing to do with it.

And it just kept coming. That day, seated comfortably in her office chair and taking a careful sip from her steaming mug of coffee, Magdalene made an announcement with such a mellow, emotionless tone that it completely belied the disastrous implications it would have for the school.

“I am doing away with the Houses.”

In retrospect, Sam should have probably waited to drink her own brew until Magdalene finished announcing her next villainous pursuit, because she promptly choked on her coffee and proceeded to cough for what felt like forever. When she was able to breathe again, with George patting her on the back, she could see that the pronouncement had left absolutely everybody around the table just as stunned.

David, as the newly confirmed History Chair and the latest addition to the transition committee, had his jaw hanging somewhere on the floor. Even Joel seemed speechless.

And no wonder. Since the school’s inception, Three Dragons had been divided into Houses, symbolizing each dragon—Sky Blue, Viridescent, and Amber—corresponding to the cliffs that the school perched upon. At the beginning and for centuries, the girls had been sorted into the Houses according to their eye color. However, thankfully during Orla’s tenure, this division had been abandoned, both due to the school’s student body becoming more diverse and the whole concept’s distinctly racial connotations. Nowadays, the girls chose for themselves where they wanted to be placed. Once assigned, they spent their years at the school being part of that particular tight-knit community. Each House was led by three

Proctors, senior girls who excelled in academics and sports, and thus were honored with a position of authority and high responsibility.

These exclusive, rather insular communities were one of the oldest and most cherished traditions at Dragons. Sure, they were also the biggest source of contention among students and faculty, with numerous conflicts arising from the sports and academic competitions. The hatred between Houses was legendary, with the arguments and competitiveness at times resulting in injury to students, but they also stood for teamwork and accomplished banding the students together like very few things did. By the time they graduated, their allegiance to each other was so strong, they felt like family.

Sam herself didn't particularly fit in any of the Houses and had felt stifled in her Sky Blue designated one. She had always assumed it was mostly due to her being the only poor and orphaned child at Dragons at the time. Since scholarships for disadvantaged students were introduced much later, for the longest time Sam had been the only kid at school whose fee was paid by virtual strangers and the only one who had absolutely nowhere to go in the summer and for holidays. She'd stuck out like a sore thumb regardless of the color of her eyes or the whole sisterhood concept that the Houses had pushed on the pupils. And once she figured out she liked girls? Her otherness became self-imposed. Poor, orphan, and secretly queer. No, teenaged Sam did not belong and certainly had not felt like her House was her family.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

But this fight wasn't about her anymore. This was larger than anything else Magdalene had proposed so far. She could do away with half the faculty, hell, all the faculty and Dragons would survive. But to do away with the very foundation of the school?

To dissolve the Houses... Sam did not really have a simile for how that would affect Dragons. Hell, they probably would have a revolt on their hands. The Old Dragonettes—the graduates of the school—might even march on the island, and burn Magdalene in effigy or some such thing.

The low husky voice dripping with sarcasm and derision brought Sam out of her harrowing musings.

“From your highly intelligent facial expressions and lack of opposition, I can surmise that you are all on board?” Magdalene smirked into her mug and Sam felt her face heat up at the audacity.

“With all due respect, Headmistress—”

A regal hand rose 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, perhaps remembering that it was Sam's attempted defense of the Houses he was laughing at, and extending a tentative hand towards Magdalene.

“Surely you’re joking?” His tone was incredulous as if deciding whether to take the whole proposal as a ruse or start puffing up in outrage at the realization that it 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, biding her time. Getting into a major altercation in front of others would not do her any good.

So when David stood up and offered to wait for her after the meeting was adjourned, Sam just shook her head. He rolled his eyes and then gave her the thumbs up. Yeah, yeah, he was rooting for Sam. So was Joanne, who was still due to have her re-hiring interview, and so was Orla, who by some miracle, was still around. Sam made a mental note to ask Magdalene if she’d changed her mind about the former headmistress.

Joel stood up quickly, but before he opened his mouth—surely to spew whatever high-handed invective, after finally realizing that the new headmistress was about to single-handedly dismantle the very soul of the school—once again a single dismissive gesture of a graceful hand was enough to swiftly shut him up.

“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 unexpected praise, and Sam wanted to simultaneously gag at the

fake compliment Magdalene was paying his nonexistent intellect, and at how neatly she put him not just in his place, but in her corner. Even if he staunchly opposed the reform, he was now duty-bound to help Magdalene. A beautiful woman was relying on him after all. God, men could be simpletons, all of them. He bowed to her rather clumsily, though Sam knew he fancied himself charming, and exited the office, almost stepping on the swaggering-in Willoughby, whose arrival signaled eleven o'clock. As Joel cursed under his breath, Willoughby just meowed something that sounded decidedly profane in the direction of the departing trustee and continued on his path, undeterred.

To Sam's surprise, Magdalene did not even bat an eye as the massive ginger cat hefted his considerable bulk up on the windowsill and made himself comfortable on his pillow. Sam wondered how the hell the aforementioned pillow was still on the windowsill, with Magdalene showing her displeasure at every opportunity that the 'mangy animal' was being allowed to roam the school.

As Willoughby kneaded his bedding—that had, by some miracle, escaped the Headmistress' wrath—and stretched before making a neat cat loaf and proceeding to purr as loudly as a tractor, Magdalene gave Sam a long look out of eyes that were more amber than aquamarine in the summer sun.

"I assume you've stayed behind to plead the case for the Houses."

"Yes."

Magdalene stood up and, to Sam's even bigger surprise, extended a slender hand and gave Willoughby's ear a quick scratch. The cat—who tolerated absolutely no touching—leaned into the caress and purred louder. Traitor, Sam thought, even if she herself craved the feeling of long, graceful fingers on her skin. Unbidden, a memory of those cool hands holding her face as that lush mouth took everything it wanted from her—her breath and her sanity—intruded with the power of a sledgehammer.

“Don’t...”

The quiet, husky sound, more an exhalation than an actual spoken word, shook Sam out of her reverie. Magdalene’s face was shadowed, but the expressive eyes gave her away. Just as they had given her away at that bar, showing her interest, emboldening Sam to make the first move by sending her a drink. The hooded eyes had seen right through her then and did so now, effectively guessing exactly what memory Sam was reliving.

The moment stretched between them for what seemed like an eternity, and Sam thought it had to be some perverse god’s cruel joke to bring Magdalene to Dragons. Of all the people who could have become the new Headmistress, and by virtue of that were forever out of Sam’s reach, it had to be Magdalene. Of all the people who were cutting and tearing Sam’s beloved Dragons to pieces, it had to be the one woman who’d taken her apart and put her back together in the space of one night in Manhattan. It had to be Magdalene. Sam hoped that the aforementioned deity had a good laugh, cruel bastard that it was.

Sam shook her head slightly, willing both of them to move past the awkwardness of the moment and the clear yearning that was surely all over her face. To break the deadlock they found themselves in, Sam chose to change the subject to something if not easier, then at least something that probably already had a concrete resolution.

“Have you made a decision on Professor Fenway?”

Magdalene faltered slightly in scratching under Willoughby’s chin, and the cat opened his eyes which had been slit in ecstasy seconds ago and gave Sam what she could only interpret as a glare for having caused the interruption. How he knew, Sam had no idea, but he definitely blamed her, his feline disdain evident.

“Yes, I decided to keep Professor Fenway at Dragons. She agreed to a probationary

year as English Chair. We shall see how it goes.”

Sam’s breath left her lungs in a whoosh, and she saw the sensuous full lips curl into a little smile.

“Well, that’s... well, that’s good. Thank you. May I ask what changed your mind?”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

“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...” It was too huge, too unbelievable to even voice it.

“I mean that you made a compelling case.”

Sam’s heart was hammering so loudly in her chest, she was certain the whole school could hear it.

Magdalene's smile was a touch self-deprecating when she added, “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.”

“Except gratitude isn’t why I provided the defense I did.”

“Ah, yes, she is essential to the school.”

Sam swallowed the lump that had suddenly formed in her throat at the thought of all the things essential to the school that were being simply swept aside.

“Headmistress, the Houses are essential for the school too.”

“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.” Magdalene waved away Sam’s look of outrage.

“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.” Sam’s face fell and her heart plummeted. Joanne, more so than Orla, was the one person at Dragons she cherished, she treasured, she truly loved.

“No, stop.” Magdalene turned away from her and looked out of the window, hands on her hips. “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.” Sam’s words were tearful, and she couldn’t make herself care. Joanne was safe. Better than safe. Magdalene had made a change that Orla should have implemented five years ago. She’d taken away the strain and the pressure of the Chairmanship and given Joanne the joy and simple pleasure of doing what she loved to do, anyway.

“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 scratching Willoughby’s ear, with the cat unrolling from his loaf-like position and stretching in complete and utter ecstasy under her ministrations. Now that some crucial things had been resolved, Sam allowed herself to relate.

“The girls learn the importance of a collective, that they are stronger together, that

they can achieve so much more as a team, that belonging is important—” Sam stopped her enumeration when an eyebrow rose questioningly.

“Did you belong?” And with one question, Sam felt her argument start to fall apart and her defenses crumble. She wanted to stand her ground, but three simple words had dismantled the very foundations of her position.

“Your eyes are grey, 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?”

Sam dropped her chin and looked away. She knew the answer to that one. There were no girls with this rare genetic condition at Dragons and, to her knowledge, never had been.

“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.”

Sam wanted to jump and defend a two-hundred-year-old tradition, but to her own horror, all that came out of her mouth was a choked sob. But Magdalene wasn’t done.

“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?”

Sam was, of course, aware of those developments. The Houses were notoriously competitive, and the adversity was only stoked higher by all the cups and

competitions that pitted them against each other. Sam could still remember getting her nose bloodied by the Amber House girls after she'd scored the winning goal in the soccer championship in her sophomore year.

“This isn't that magical school in Scotland, Professor Threadneedle. And even there, the Houses were the ones to tear the school apart, to establish unfair stereotypes and misconceptions, to pretty much determine the entire future of a student before they uttered a single word!”

Impressed and not a little turned on now at Magdalene's display of nerd-like bravado, Sam just stared. The cat, disturbed by the agitation of the hands that were caressing him, jumped off the windowsill and hissed at Sam before putting his tail up in the air and departing with a disgruntled air.

“Pop culture references aside, and wow, how cool is it that you even know...” Magdalene's eyes narrowed and Sam decided not to finish that sentence. “The Old Dragonettes will not permit this to happen.” The last line of defense seemed flimsy even to Sam's own ears.

“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?”

Sam had, of course, known this.

“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 hated that Magdalene had a point. That she, in fact, had many many points, but her stomach clenched for a different reason. There it was again, the unfailing correctness of the terminology used by Magdalene. Sure, you could learn the customs of the locals, you could even know the nickname of the one local watering hole down in the village, for nobody called it The Rooster or whatever its original name was. Both the school folk and the townspeople called it Rowena’s, after the first owner who had long since passed. But the way Magdalene kept correctly hitting all those notes, never once missing? Sure, Magdalene was always prepared, always so on top of things, but this was just a bit too accurate, uncannily so. All of Sam’s instincts were standing at attention.

“I accept that some of the reasons behind your proposal are reasonable—”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

“Some? How generous of you, Professor.” The eyes, more blue than amber, were watchful and the voice dripped with sarcasm.

“We agree that we disagree on this for the moment, Headmistress. Could we perhaps revisit?” At Magdalene’s dismissive wave, Sam bid her farewell, agreeing that the matter was by no means settled, although Magdalene’s eyeroll certainly spoke of the opposite. A strategic retreat left her more options than a balls-out crash and burn, and so Sam decided that leaving was best for now. Plus, she and her aforementioned instincts were on a mission.

* * *

Guided by her intuition and a conviction that was forming with every new interaction with the headmistress, Sam decided to check on her suspicion that Magdalene had a connection to Dragons in the one place that was open to her. On her way to the archives, located in the basement of the Sky Blue House dormitory, Sam found herself despairing at the disrepair awaiting her in the dusty and moldy underground corridors. She had not remembered it being quite so shabby in her days. Sure, about twenty years had passed since she’d last been down here, hiding from the Proctor who had insisted on her participation in some House event or other, when Sam had only wanted to read her book in peace.

The rusty lock opened with an ominous creak, and Sam looked inside a veritable dungeon. Rows and rows of dusty cardboard boxes lined the somewhat sagging wooden shelves that filled the cramped room. It pained her to admit that some things Magdalene was absolutely right about. Parts of the school were in such a precarious state that it was embarrassing they had been allowed to get this bad.

She stopped and gave herself a good minute to formulate her query in her head. Googling Magdalene hadn't helped much, since most of the information about her related to her years at Rodante after her marriage to Timothy. Sam had no idea about her maiden name or her age. And Magdalene's looks didn't help matters at all. Shallow wrinkles around her mouth and eyes didn't give away her real age but only added to her allure. Yeah, Sam knew she must be totally gone over this woman if even her wrinkles were alluring.

Not having any real help from her quarry herself, Sam cast her mind to the clues in front of her. Orla and Joanne acted like they knew Magdalene. And while Orla's knowledge could be inferred from whatever academic events they might have crossed paths at during Orla's time at Dragons, it was Joanne's familiarity with Magdalene that Sam found surprising. She had been on staff at the school most of her life. Considering that Magdalene could be any age from forty upwards, Sam had her work cut out for her.

But after two hours of being bent over countless boxes of student files, Sam found what she was looking for. As luck would have it, there were surprisingly few Magdalenes that had attended Dragons, and only one that fit the scarce criteria. Magdalene Smith had been admitted as a sophomore on a probationary basis. There was no picture, and the file itself was pitifully thin. The student's probationary period had been terminated six months later and Magdalene Smith expelled for 'physical and background unsuitability' and 'failure to integrate into Three Dragons' existing institutional, cultural and religious principles.' High grades were interspersed with disciplinary measures taken against young Magdalene, mostly for common or silly infractions like occasional fighting, refusing to take part in House activities, and—to Sam's utter astonishment—fidgeting. Damn, what barbarian counted that as a strike against a child?

And Magdalene fighting? She couldn't see the now cool and collected woman losing her composure under any circumstances. Well, under certain circumstances, but those

were behind closed doors and sans clothes. Still, nowadays Magdalene was faced with protests and outbursts and downright insults from pretty much everyone at the school, and had been since she'd arrived—and she hadn't as much as raised an eyebrow, not to mention her voice. And fidgeting? The formidable Headmistress was a veritable sphinx at times, not a muscle moving in her countenance when repose was required.

What had happened to the perfectly normal and ordinary child, who'd fought and argued and was restless through boring classes, to transform her into the person who was now systematically dismantling the school brick by old, dusty brick?

Sam felt like everything recorded in the sparsely populated file barely painted the whole picture. She herself had been a belligerent and reluctant pupil, as Magdalene had remarked, 'shoehorned' into a rigid structure she did not belong in. But she'd been allowed to stay. Why wasn't Magdalene?

A noise behind her made her turn around abruptly, heart beating noisily in her ears.

"I figured you'd come down here sooner or later, child."

Joanne stood in the opened doorway holding a flashlight.

"I guess you figured right." Sam carefully set the file aside and put the cardboard lid back on the box. "I also guess you know who I was looking up? Since you yourself pushed me towards getting curious about it."

"Always too smart for your own good, little one. I wasn't entirely sure if letting you know she had been a Dragonette once was a good idea. And she hasn't brought it up herself. Though perhaps she should have. Would've gotten her much more goodwill from the faculty and the girls who are summering at the school. Seeing as how she is one of us."

“Is she? One of us?” Sam put the box back on the sagging, moldy shelf and picked up the file, holding it in front of her like a shield, although she couldn’t say why she had to defend herself, especially when speaking to her oldest guardian and friend.

“She was, Sammy. Until she wasn’t, I guess.” Joanne came in and sat down next to her, her hands shaking slightly, whether at the exertion of getting down to the basement through the labyrinth of passageways or at the prospect of having this conversation.

“Why was she expelled six months into her first year?”

“Her file says she did not fit in.” The answer was so ridiculous to Sam’s ears that she felt rooted to the spot.

“File says? Did not fit in? Are you talking about her eyes? Heterochromia is genetic. It is not her fault. Hell, I did not fit in, and not just because my eyes are grey. This kind of logic is like telling any of the scholarship girls they don’t fit in. You and Orla and everyone else at the school championed both myself and Lily and countless others. But you lot canned a sixteen-year-old kid for having bi-colored eyes?”

Her outrage was so strong, Sam hadn’t noticed a second person crossing the threshold into the archives.

“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 stood tall and proud in the dim light, the overhead emergency bulb washing her in an eerie glow. With both Sam and Joanne staring at her, she went on.

“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 school 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 dusty room, seeming to fill it with her presence. The subtle scent of wild jasmine did warm, familiar things to Sam’s insides.

“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...” The word simply rolled off her tongue making Sam and Joanne visibly cringe again. “She and a few other teachers went on strike to make sure this never happened again. Didn’t you, Professor Dorsea?”

Sam’s mind, too busy doing the math, suddenly came to a screeching halt.

“You mean when I was found?”

Joanne moved uncomfortably on her perch and refused to raise her eyes.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

“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. 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 and continued, “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 kept looking from one woman to the other in complete shock.

“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.” With the parting shot, Magdalene tugged the file from Sam’s hands and vanished as quietly as she’d come in.

To her utter astonishment, Sam observed Willoughby’s tail disappearing behind the corner as the cat trotted placidly behind the Headmistress, apparently forsaking all his usual sleep patterns and the comfort of his afternoon pillow in the library where he should have been at this hour. It seemed Magdalene was prone to disruption of even the most ingrained rituals and customs.

Sam remembered making a wish while standing desolate and desperate on the Amber Dragon weeks ago. Didn’t they say ‘beware of wishes coming true’? What had she started by making that plea? And what would Magdalene finish by returning to Three Dragons?

8

Of Feckless Exes & Injured Limbs

And so, with the truth about Magdalene Nox and her history at Dragons coming to light, Sam focused on the present and not on the memories of their now seemingly long past encounter in Manhattan.

Magdalene Nox was one of them. Sam could not really wrap her head around the events of the past couple of weeks. To be truthful, she couldn’t quite wrap her head around the events of the past three months either, but realized she should perhaps set that broader question aside and focus on more pressing matters.

Magdalene Nox had been a Dragonette for six months. She had essentially been expelled for being illegitimate, which, despite its archaic and horribly discriminatory connotations, had still been the rule in the school’s deeply religious charter back then.

The document wasn't updated until after Magdalene had been expelled, Sam realized, and thirty years ago it still reflected the customs and zealous beliefs hailing from 1810 and the school's very origin. In fact, the same people who founded the school would later expand their ideals and form the Know-Nothing party. The ideology they promoted was backward even then, discriminatory, anti-Catholic, anti-many-other-things that were developing deep roots due to the anti-immigrant sentiment. And while it was much more successful down South, Massachusetts was its cradle, after it first made news because its members burned down a convent and tarred and feathered a Catholic priest.

So it wasn't a surprise that the school charter included all manner of things that were intolerant and outdated. In fact, if the charter hadn't been amended thirty years ago, most of its content would be illegal these days, due to how it discriminated against other religions, races, familial backgrounds, and of course sexual orientation. And that change was made because of Magdalene. Even thirty years ago, the Headmistress had caused a ruckus everywhere she went. They threw her out and then were forced to change the rules. And now she was back with a vengeance.

Was this what said vengeance looked like? Was this what she was doing at the school by summarily dismissing every single faculty member including resident faculty, every janitor, and Mess Hall worker? Reviewing the curriculum and throwing out half of its more progressive classes? Closing down three-quarters of the extra-curricular clubs and activities? Looking into cutting scholarships to save funding? Was this her way of getting back at the institution that hadn't wanted her because of the circumstances of her birth, no matter what bullshit they'd chosen to put down as justification for her dismissal in her file? And what did she mean, 'among other reasons'? Were there other grounds for her removal from the school? Joanne seemed like she was firmly convinced it was because Magdalene was an illegitimate child and felt extremely guilty for not standing up for her at the time, but was there something else?

Sure, the 80s, and even the 90s to some extent, were brutal in terms of religious prejudice among certain communities and in select enclaves, like Dragons. In fact at that time, pretty much the entire world had not yet caught up to the winds of change and the World Health Organization only removed homosexuality from the list of mental diseases in 1990. The thought made Sam swallow thickly at how many people were subjected to atrocities simply for loving whom they loved.

In those years, the stigma that came with being different, illegitimate, gay, was felt even more greatly. Throw in Dragons' antiquated and obscure eye color preference, and you had the perfect storm for discrimination. Sam had felt it, growing up at Dragons, and only Orla's tenure had lessened the oppressive intolerance despite the amendments the charter had undergone earlier. So change happened, at times slowly.

But at other times it happened quickly and could be devastating in effect and proportion. From her usual perch on the Amber Dragon Cliff, Sam could almost feel that change, embodied by the object of her thoughts, approaching. The graceful gait and the subtle scent mixing with the now almost wilted wild jasmine were both familiar. What wasn't familiar was how a big, fat cat had suddenly become a constant companion to the Headmistress. Willoughby slunk towards Sam for a brief sniff at her hand before quickly padding back to the one he'd started to surreptitiously follow wherever she went.

"I spent my evenings here on the cliff 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?" The voice, the quiet, husky and inquisitive tone of it, stroked Sam's senses like silk.

"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."

"My, you are a veritable Jessica Fletcher and Miss Marple all in one, Professor." Magdalene finally came closer and, to Sam's pleasure, pulled out a blanket. To Sam's further delight, she sat in such a manner as to leave space for Willoughby, who trotted over and made himself comfortable next to the Headmistress, one of his paws gently and unobtrusively touching her thigh. He was asleep within seconds.

Magdalene rolled her eyes at Sam's obvious mirth at the situation.

"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."

Realizing what she'd said, Sam promptly shut her mouth and turned away from Magdalene, who'd regarded her with something like mischief in her eyes.

"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?"

Faced with such complete and utter honesty, Sam had no other choice but to answer with some honesty of her own.

"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.”

“And does this love and adoration of a brick and mortar place prohibit you from seeing that Dragons requires massive changes to allow the school to keep pace with the times?”

“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, and she shivered in the evening breeze. 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 tried for humor, but she knew she wasn’t really pulling off the softening of the blow.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

“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.”

“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!”

“That would be unprofessional of me, Professor.”

As Sam tried to find something to contradict the ironclad argument, a rustle in the bushes behind them made her turn around. George stood there looking sheepish, and for a second Sam thought she’d overheard their conversation in its entirety. But the ever-gregarious woman smiled broadly and gestured towards Magdalene.

“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.”

“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.”

With that, Magdalene rose swiftly and carefully picked up Willoughby, setting him

on the ground as she shook out the blanket. He yawned, growled in displeasure, and then simply fell in step with her as she marched back towards the school, but not before gentle hands placed the blanket over Sam's shoulders with a murmured, "It's rather chilly here tonight, stay warm." So much for professional detachment, Sam thought.

* * *

She spent another hour on the cliffs, enjoying the peace and ruminating on the meaning of the blanket, while being thoroughly warmed by it and the scent that clung to it. When she judged that enough time had passed to make an appearance at the Headmistress' office and inquire about the verdict, Sam got up and made her way to the school.

But it wasn't Magdalene who answered her knock on the door. Timothy Nox stood in front of her, his face impassive but for a shadow of what looked like displeasure that quickly crossed it before he composed himself.

"Sam, was it?"

Well now, if that was how he wanted to play it. Magdalene calling her 'Professor Threadneedle' showed Sam respect and a certain nod to her position as a teacher at the Academy in spite of their history. Timothy's use of her first name smacked of a not-so-subtle attempt at putting her in her place, a place occupied by the hired help.

"Mr. Nox." Sam's inflection on the title didn't seem lost on Timothy who smirked and opened the door wider to allow Sam to pass.

"I guess there has to be something about you that makes her like you, and I don't for a second believe it's all those awards."

So this was going to be that kind of conversation then. Sam braced herself for it but stood her ground.

“I’m here to inquire about the call Headmistress Nox had with the trustees earlier. I’m sure you know I have a vested interest in how the school is faring.”

“Only in how the school fares? Or its Headmistress as well? I can’t help but hear she’s spending a considerable amount of time with a mere teacher. Put you on the transition commission, despite your... shall we say inexperience.”

“You mean my youth?” It felt somewhat good, if very petty, to throw that back into the older man’s face, since it was perhaps the only thing Sam had that Timothy could no longer claim. For in pretty much every other column, Timothy Nox had Sam beat. He was rich, handsome, he commanded a huge business empire, and by all accounts, he was accomplished in several musical and artistic pursuits. Sam could say none of the above and had exactly two thousand dollars to her name after all her student loans were paid. She also had no home or much artistic talent to speak of. She shrugged a shoulder and raised her chin a notch higher.

“Regardless of what might be going on, you would probably wish to know that I’ve never known her to go for younger women, Sam. In fact, I’ve never known her pursuits of women to be of any consequence in the long term, if you get my meaning? And I’ve known her for twenty years. But there’s clearly something about you that attracts her, I suppose, despite your rudeness.”

Sam wanted to flinch at the implications of what Timothy might have guessed about her, and her first instinct was to deny, deny, deny. But a strong denial would only appear more suspicious. An outburst of ‘How dare you insinuate anything about me!’ would only attract more attention. And so Sam stoically did not bat an eye. Additionally, being called rude twice in the space of an hour did not sit well with Sam, but since she couldn’t deny that she had certainly been rude to Timothy, even if

only by provoking him, she just stood, silently awaiting further developments in this surreal discussion.

But then, just as suddenly as it appeared, Timothy's belligerence seemed to drain away, and he stepped aside, turning his back to Sam, clearly lost in thought.

"Do you know I asked her to marry me pretty much the very first day I met her?" Timothy turned back around, and his face showed so much wistfulness, that Sam's heart squeezed in empathy, although she had no idea why she felt bad for him.

"It's true. She was a teacher at my parents' school. And she was a force of nature. I fell for her in a second. They talk about love at first sight in all sorts of sappy books and movies. Never believed in that crap myself. But one afternoon they forced me to attend some ridiculous recital or another at Rodante. To this day I couldn't tell you what the hell they were playing. Next to me sat the most intriguing woman I'd ever seen. Haughty and distant, she was just so captivating, and indeed, I was caught. Deer in the headlights. At the reception later that evening, I told her one day I'd marry her. I didn't even ask her if she was single or taken. Yes, I do understand how creepy and bratty that must've sounded. Didn't matter to me because I was completely in love with her."

Sam must have made some sort of noise, because Timothy winced as if he'd suddenly remembered he wasn't alone in the room.

"You must be wondering why I'm telling you all this."

Sam remained silent. Clearly, the man required no answers or in fact any participation from her at this point.

"Well, it took her years to tell me anything about herself. Anything of consequence, of true value to her. And here you are, three weeks in, and I noticed during our

transition committee meetings, that you already know her coffee order. Moreover, she gladly accepts your java offerings without blinking an eye. She told me you know she went to The Three Dragons, about her less fortunate beginnings, the whole sordid story of her being expelled from this godforsaken place...”

The name of the Academy being said in quite that manner felt wrong and cutting to Sam’s ear. Just another little thing to underline who belonged at Dragons and who didn’t.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

“Her coffee order is not a state secret, and as for the rest, that wasn’t hard to find either. I’m faculty here and have access to the old files.”

Timothy whirled on her then.

“But why do you care so much? Why does Magdalene’s past interest you so much? Got yourself a crush on the Headmistress?”

Spittle flew, but despite being disgusted, Sam gave no ground and refused to turn away.

“Everything about the school interests me. And Ms. Nox, as you said, is the Headmistress.” Her inflection on the ‘Ms’ instead of the ‘Mrs’ made a vein pop on Timothy’s forehead, and Sam enjoyed it despite herself. “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.”

A calm voice from the door made them jump apart.

“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.”

Sam flinched and turned around to see Magdalene standing in the doorway, her new, ginger shadow sitting on his haunches and glaring at the people in the office as if

telling them off for occupying his space. Or maybe he understood what they'd been talking about just now. What Magdalene had surely overheard, how Sam pretty much confessed that she'd use any and all means to screw her over. God, would she really? That was the million-dollar question. How far would Sam go to save the school?

And the moment she started attributing human thoughts and feelings to a feline, it was time to call it a night—before she stepped into more potholes she'd be unable to dig herself out of.

“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 on 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 idiotic 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.

“Headmistress! Magdalene! I can't find Sam, come quick. Oh, thank goodness, Sammy, you're here. It's Lily!”

Grabbing Joanne by the sleeve, Sam could utter only a breathless, “Where?” before taking off running in the direction of the faculty quarters, where the older woman was pointing. She could hear Joanne behind her, slightly out of breath but still keeping up, and offered her a hand as they took the stairs to the second floor together. Right in front of Sam's apartment door, the familiar, slim, gangly figure lay on the floor in the dark. Sam swatted at the nearby light switch to no avail and decided to shift her focus to the girl in front of her.

Joanne must have propped her up a bit against the door, as Lily was holding her ankle

with a pained expression and her breathing was shallow, coming out in small whines and pants.

“Lily! What happened?”

“I dunno... I was coming to talk to you and I guess I slipped? Not sure, but... Sam, my ankle really hurts...” The girl was holding up bravely, but her voice was laced with pain and her cheeks were wet with tears.

Sam knelt on the floor and immediately felt the knees of her pants get soaked through. Water on the tiles? The old worn-out flooring would be slippery as ice if you so much as spat on it. With the amount of water spilled on it now, it was a veritable ice rink. Where the hell had it come from? She looked up, trying to see the ceiling, noting that Magdalene, who must have come running after them, was doing the same. The white rafters, while somewhat in need of a fresh coat of paint, were unblemished. The roof had not leaked.

“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 came out in loud pants as the secretary tried to catch her breath.

“You called Joel about this?” Magdalene appeared displeased. “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.”

She knelt by Lily who was pale as a sheet and shivering. Pain, cold or fear, Sam thought, probably a combination of all three, since she was sitting in the dark in a huge puddle of water with what looked like a broken ankle.

“Sam, there was always a doctor in the village. Last I remember it was old Franz...”

Sam again marveled at how she hadn’t cottoned on sooner that Magdalene had spent time on the island.

“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...”

“Damn this backwater place and their refusal to finally connect the school and the town with a drivable road!” Startled by the sudden outburst, everyone turned to Magdalene, but she just lifted a hand in a pacifying gesture before taking over.

“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 as if searching for someone and right as her eyes were seeking, heavy steps could be heard and Magdalene’s face relaxed almost imperceptibly. “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.”

As she finished giving out orders, the Headmistress leaned closer and whispered something to Lily which Sam did not catch, but it made the girl smile in spite of her pain, and Sam was glad for it, glad and thankful that Magdalene was in charge.

Timothy picked Lily up, mindful of her injuries, and—with Sam’s help— carried her outside, while Joanne got out her phone and, trying to beat the spotty reception, dialed the doctor. Doing felt good. Doing felt much much better than standing around wringing her hands over Lily, who was now lying on the grass even paler than before, and whose tears hadn’t stopped running down her cheeks, despite her valiantly trying

to keep them at bay. Sam had never broken or sprained an ankle, but she had injured most of her fingers playing volleyball, and she knew something about the pain the girl was feeling. The fact that she was this brave and not howling and sobbing, as Sam herself probably would have, was a huge feat in anyone's eyes.

* * *

Franz had come surprisingly quickly, but after taking one look at the injury had demanded rather rudely that Lily be taken down to town, to his clinic. With the school inaccessible from town by car, they had to carry Lily part of the way, and for once Sam was rather grateful to have Timothy with them. For someone who looked like he had never done any hard labor in his life, he was surprisingly strong and had enough endurance to carry the girl down the winding path and to Franz's truck which was parked at the bottom of the cliff.

Sam and Magdalene accompanied Lily to the clinic, and Sam held the girl's hand throughout the consultation, daring the dour man to say anything about the girl on his examination table. She could see that he really wanted to show them the door, but either thoroughly intimidated by Sam—which was unlikely, for she knew she wasn't scary even under the worst circumstances—or by the silent yet menacing presence of the Headmistress, he said nothing.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

A couple of hours later, Lily, her badly sprained ankle in a rather fetching air boot, was made comfortable in the vacant teacher's quarters right next to Sam's.

"I don't want her to be alone in that huge dormitory. She'll need someone to look after her, and the five remaining seniors aren't up to it. And here, either Joanne or I will be able to."

Lily protested feebly that, once she got her crutches, she'd be just fine to maneuver on her own, but one look from Magdalene ensured full capitulation. Sam broke out in a sweat despite the look not being addressed at her. The power of those bi-colored eyes, put on display like that, was quite astounding. The sheer authority, the weight of responsibility, and the determination to get things done her way... Well, it was something. Especially when Sam had seen those eyes close in surrender. The dichotomy was stunning.

The Headmistress took her leave and, with the rest of the wellwishers having departed earlier, Sam remained to make sure Lily settled in comfortably and could reach her water bottle and the snacks Joanne and the rest of the folks still at school had left for her.

"You have to admit though, teach... She's kinda hot." Lily's face was split by an unrepentant smile.

"Those better be the drugs talking, missy." But Sam knew she was blushing as she tucked the blanket around Lily's injured leg.

"I'm not saying anything. But you, despite all the fighting you guys do on the daily,

like her ‘cause she’s kinda brilliant... No worries, your secret is safe with me. Plus...” Lily lifted her hands in surrender and then started shaking one of them as if scalded. “Hot, hot, hot.”

“Those are definitely the drugs talking. Now, you’ve got your phone, and I’m just a call or a loud yell away. Off to sleep with you.”

Lily was still mumbling about hot older women and their stern ways as Sam closed the door and was faced with one of the hottest older women with her own very stern ways waiting by her apartment, looking austere indeed.

“We need to talk about what happened, Professor Threadneedle.”

“What happened?” Sam stared at her rather dumbfoundedly.

“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.

“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.”

Confused and unsettled, Sam struggled a bit with the door to her apartment.

“How is she?” Magdalene’s voice sounded right next to her shoulder and Sam was hot all over again.

“You mean how is she now versus when you saw her three minutes ago?” Sam knew she was pushing it, but it was much better than still feeling embarrassed over being called out by a student for finding the Headmistress attractive and then having said attractive Headmistress ambush her moments later.

“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 pushed into Sam’s room as soon as she’d opened the door and without a backward glance stalked towards the window, staring distractedly into the darkness behind the glass. Sam could have sworn she saw neither the window nor the shadows beyond it.

“She’s just a child. And he almost refused to treat her.” The gravelly voice sounded forlorn and disappointed.

Sam gaped.

“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.”

In a graceful motion that Sam followed avidly, Magdalene turned around.

“I think you’ve been surprised by me a bit longer than just the past three weeks.”

Sam found herself suddenly standing very close to the pair of deep amber eyes, the blue circle almost disappearing, being consumed by the darker color. And just as suddenly the feeling she’d had all week, of being untethered, of belonging nowhere

and being no one, disappeared, the scent of wild jasmine grounding Sam like nothing seemed to have ever done before.

“I still have no idea why you even looked at me back in New York.”

Magdalene threw her head back and laughed, exposing the long line of ivory throat, and Sam’s mouth watered.

“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.”

“So you spoke to me because I was so awkward and pitiful?” Sam gave her a puzzled look.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

“Yes, yes, all charity on my part.” Magdalene bit her lip and Sam could see she was desperately trying to hide a smile. But the delight won, and the smile blossomed triumphantly on those kissable lips, transforming her whole face. Sam was instantly charmed and completely disarmed. A slender hand rose and fingertips caressed Sam’s jaw, from ear to chin, making her shiver. But before she gave into whatever else was coming, Sam had to make sure she cleared up her earlier blunder.

“I apologize about before... What you overheard with Timothy.” It felt imperative now, with Magdalene’s hand on her skin to tell her that, advantage be damned, Sam wasn’t conniving. That if they would go to war over the school, it would be a fair fight.

Graceful fingers brushed the line of her jaw gently, in a whisper of a caress, before reaching her mouth and tracing the lower lip. Sam’s tongue peeked out involuntarily and licked at the tender fingertips. Magdalene uttered a startled gasp, and as quickly as it had appeared, the hand dropped.

Magdalene took a step sideways, putting distance between them, effectively breaking the moment.

“Ah, 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 her voice lowered to that register that simply undid Sam. “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 her touch and the taste of her skin still lingering on Sam’s face and tongue, Magdalene was gone from the room, and Sam felt like the light dimmed a bit. She was alone and untethered once again.

9

Of Prescient Teens & Belated Understandings

The following morning, after making sure Lily had breakfast in her room, Sam joined the other faculty members in the Mess Hall. Throughout the summer months, only a skeleton crew remained at the Academy to continue to provide meals and necessities to the teachers and students who boarded over the hiatus.

Joanne and Orla sat close together, whispering to each other at one end of the massive table, with Magdalene and Timothy eating in silence at the other. George sat right in the middle of the two groups, eyeing each faction with her customary mischievous smile. Sam was grateful when she beckoned her noisily, thus sparing her the rather nerve-racking decision of which side to sit with—the one she really wanted to, but was most certainly not welcomed into, or the one loyalty dictated she should join.

“How is that little darling doing this morning?” George slurped on what looked like cocoa.

“Lily’s fine. We’re waiting for Dr. Franz to bring up the crutches, and she’ll be more

independent in moving around, but she had a quiet night. The pain medication has helped, and she is mostly just embarrassed by all the attention at this point.”

“Clumsy of her for sure, but she’s a sweet girl.”

Not wanting to start rumors or to unnecessarily worry George, Sam did not want to bring up what Magdalene had mentioned the night before, how there should not have been any water on the tiles, and how all the lights in the hallway were suddenly not working. She’d spent half the night twisting and turning in her bed, between decidedly not thinking about somebody wanting to potentially hurt her and Magdalene’s fingertips on her face, on her mouth... Or about how Magdalene had called her beautiful. Or how Magdalene found her alluring. Overall, Sam had been trying not to think about so many things.

Timothy’s loud, slightly over-the-top laughter made her flinch, so caught up in her thoughts Sam was, and George shook her head before muttering something under her breath.

“I’m sorry?” Not that Sam was particularly keen to hear what George had to say, especially on the subject of Magdalene’s ex-husband, but the secretary looked disgruntled, and Sam felt compelled to offer a shoulder.

“I said Timothy has certainly made himself at home here. Comes and goes as he pleases and seems to think he’s welcome at all times. Magdalene should stop encouraging him. She might’ve finally forgiven him, although I sure hope she hasn’t. But I guess one cannot command one’s heart.”

George’s tone had taken on a sneering edge, and the look she sent Timothy was full of disdain.

“Forgiven?” Sam’s chest constricted painfully. Why did she keep asking questions

she really didn't want to hear the answers to?

“Maggie caught him cheating years ago. That was how their divorce came about, you know. I mean, they were the most beautiful couple, so well-suited. Perfect in every way. Until she unexpectedly canceled a trip and found Timothy in their own bed with some cheap floozy. Maggie filed for divorce almost on the spot. That was a really rough time for the poor darling. She stayed with me afterward for quite a bit. He really did a number on her, and she needed space to retreat and regroup. I was just so happy to be able to provide that.”

Sam knew George had been Magdalene's secretary for over twenty years and thought she must be the only person alive to get away with calling her by that moniker. Thinking about how the nickname absolutely did not suit the commanding, elegant woman in front of her, calmly sipping her coffee, leaving crimson marks on pristine white china, was preferable to considering the deeper implications of George's words. Was Magdalene really reconciling with her ex-husband? And why did it matter? Sam had no rights to the Headmistress. One night meant nothing. She had more important issues to deal with. Still, Sam tasted bile at the very thought of Magdalene and Timothy getting back together and tried to push it away.

Sam didn't want to think about all the information that had been dumped on her. It felt like she was intruding, and she really shouldn't have asked anything at all. She was looking in on something deeply personal and overwhelmingly private. Surely George did not just go around sharing this kind of information with anyone. But the older woman seemed absolutely enraged that Magdalene, after having been betrayed the way she was, continued to give the time of day to her ex-husband.

“Timothy has not stopped courting her and begging for forgiveness since.” George took another slurp of her cocoa, then pushed her mug away in disgust. “He's been here under the guise of ensuring that Magdalene has the freedom and authority to make cuts and changes, some of them much needed.” She nodded pointedly at the

end of the table where Orla now sat alone, Joanne having departed in the meantime.

“And this stays between us, Sam, my darling, but it seems that Timothy has just used the time to try and woo her—or whatever it is he’s ultimately after. I guess Maggie is much more susceptible than I believed. That man doesn’t deserve all the love and devotion she has for him.”

Sam felt decidedly dirty when she stole another glance at the couple laughing together at the opposite end of the table. But even though Magdalene looked serene, she still sat rather stiffly by Timothy’s side, while he was all but leaning into her personal space. Perhaps, by virtue of having known Magdalene longer, George saw things that Sam could not. But it didn’t look idyllic by any stretch of the imagination to Sam. If anything, it looked uncomfortable.

And the way George had spoken in the present tense made Sam’s heart clench painfully. Did Magdalene still love her husband? Had she forgiven him? What did George know that Sam didn’t? Was George simply more objective in her assessment, whereas Sam saw what she wanted to since she was so infatuated herself?

Head spinning from all the possible and impossible scenarios, from the gentle touches of long graceful fingers to her face the night before and George’s assertion that a reconciliation was in the cards, Sam felt like the centuries-old stone walls were closing in on her. She needed air.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

Sam excused herself under the guise of wanting to check up on something and took the long way around campus to gather her roving thoughts. She walked by the construction site that marked the restoration of the dilapidated chapel which had fallen into ruins in the past twenty or so years, since the last chaplain passed away and the school—under Orla’s stewardship—had veered towards more of a secular approach to the education provided at Dragons.

With her mind spinning with jealousy and resentment, especially after Magdalene had caressed her mouth and made Sam long all over again for things that surely could never be, she welcomed the distraction the restoration was bringing to her agitated mind.

It pained Sam that, out of all the projects to be considered, with dorms and study halls needing repairs, Magdalene had chosen to renovate the chapel.

Sam had no real opinion about a supreme being, and, being sort of agnostic, she did not judge people for their beliefs. Moreover, she knew of many lesbians who carried faith deep in their hearts despite various religions’ long and difficult history of rejecting the LGBTQIA community. Faith was a subject that she considered deeply individual and even private. Still, she felt it had no place here and shouldn’t be forced on an entire student body that was not religiously monolithic to begin with.

Steps behind her alerted her she was no longer alone with her thoughts.

“You look disgruntled, Professor Threadneedle.” Oh, yeah, she knew that voice without needing to turn around.

“You could say that, Headmistress.”

“Concerned about the state of construction? I have been assured repeatedly that they will be finished before the school year begins.” Magdalene finally emerged from the shadows next to her and stepped up to the fence surrounding the construction site, her fingers idly tracing the chain links.

For a second, all of Sam’s disappointment dissipated, mesmerized by the movement and grace of that hand. Memories of those fingertips moving over her own skin made her shiver before she shook them off, anger roaring back inside her at her own inability to escape this woman’s influence. She was a threat to so much of what Sam held dear, and yet here she stood, hypnotized by Magdalene’s hands and by her sheer presence. What a useless fool she was. So weak, so susceptible...

“I am concerned that, after repeatedly decrying the state of the school’s finances, uncovering the dire straits pretty much every single facility on the grounds is in, you chose to prioritize this restoration project.”

“Ah, I see.” Maddeningly, Magdalene did not follow up on what Sam thought was a totally inane statement.

“What is it exactly that you see, Headmistress? The school is mostly Protestant, somewhat Catholic, and has a very small percentage of Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and atheist girls. And yet you are restoring a chapel that would not be accepting of all of them?”

“And it’s the chapel that is the problem in this equation, Professor Threadneedle?”

Stunned, Sam shook her head, in vain trying to clear the fog of anger and lust that had seemed to descend upon her and to better understand the question.

“My point was that you have an issue with me restoring a chapel, but you seem to have no problem whatsoever with the fact that the school is 95 percent Christian and overwhelmingly white. I am confused by your priorities.”

As arguments went, Sam thought she'd been played by a master. Yes, the school was white, almost entirely so. Sam had no role in the admissions process, but she knew that the majority of the students were from rich and affluent Massachusetts families, and only the measly number of scholarship students were more diverse in their make-up.

She bit her lip, trying to find some counterargument, as Magdalene simply looked at her, those magical eyes bright in the morning sun.

Finally, when the silence had stretched for an uncomfortable period of time, Magdalene smiled, not unkindly.

“You are a formidable individual, Professor Threadneedle. Misguided to the point of bullish stubbornness, misinformed to the point of willful ignorance, yet so staunch in your convictions. Your loyalty to these people and these stones is absolute. It's rather endearing, despite being utterly ridiculous and absolutely undeserved.”

“I think you gave me about three different insults couched under the guise of one compliment there, Headmistress.”

“Ah, stubborn and misguided you may be, but I didn't say you were not astute.”

Despite herself, Sam chuckled, and Magdalene joined her after a second where she seemed to simply stand in the sun basking in having made Sam laugh. Obviously, Sam was deluding herself, but she liked to think that Magdalene had wanted to bring her this moment of joy. Or to simply be with her, since she seemed to unerringly find her in the most obscure places so often these days.

And what was even more deluded, Sam thought as they walked back to the school next to each other, was that the natural loner Sam Threadneedle did not seem to mind any and all intrusion these days, as long as they came from this one woman, who was a total puzzle and continuous source of irritation, anger, and sheer unadulterated lust.

They were met by George at the stairs to the main foyer, who gave them a curious look, then launched into the multitude of tasks awaiting the Headmistress in the office. Chief among them seemed to be the continuous appeasement of the Board and the Old Dragonettes who were staging a veritable insurrection against the reform of the Houses. Rumors and news had a tendency to spread like wildfire on social media among the school alumni. Sam stifled a smile. Infatuated as she might be, some things—as antiquated as they were—she held near and dear to her heart, and she relished this particular battle.

“And you Miss Cutie Pie,” George continued, “are being searched for high and low by one handsome and obviously enamored Mr. David Uttley. Our History Chair is back from his short mainland sojourn and has been beseeching me for your whereabouts. He’s awfully handsome, that one, wouldn’t you say? And so obviously sweet on you.”

The sparkle in Magdalene’s eyes dimmed a little and Sam wanted to cheerfully throttle George. No, she did not believe David was looking for her, nor did she want to hear about his crush on her, which Sam didn’t even think was a crush, to begin with. It was some form of punishment for her and David, that with both of them being single and younger than most of the faculty, everyone and their mother was on some sort of mission to get them together. It seemed that George had gotten on the same bandwagon as Orla. And of all the times to bring up David, just as she and Magdalene had shared a wonderful moment...

A moment which was obviously over, with the Headmistress striding away quickly, without as much as a by-your-leave, and George barely keeping up behind her. Sam’s

first impulse was to go after them, only to see that they were almost immediately joined by Timothy and proceeded to walk together to whatever conference call surely awaited them. Sam sighed and for the umpteenth time wondered what the hell she had gotten herself into.

* * *

She checked up on Lily shortly after, finding her in bed reading. Next to her was a pair of brand new crutches.

“The Headmistress, Hotty McHot, brought them earlier. I think she intercepted that creepy doctor on her way here. And she was looking for you, since you apparently left breakfast to come check on me? Busted, teach, so busted.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

Sam groaned and made a serious face, though she suspected her scolding had very little effect on Lily, who looked less than rueful and more impish and mischievous by the minute.

“Please don’t ever refer to her in those terms. She’s like thirty years your senior. And the Headmistress.”

“Pfft, I have eyes and so do you, teach. I see you watching her sometimes.” Sam stopped breathing for a second, and her whole body went still. But before she could object, Lily enveloped her in a massive bear hug, effectively ending any and all protests that could come from her.

“It’s okay. She’s not all bad, you know. You’re allowed to like her. Joanne told me as much.”

“Joanne?” Sam groaned and disentangled herself from Lily’s arms, sitting on the bed and covering her suddenly heated face with her hands. “Is there anyone around here who isn’t convinced I somehow have the hots for the Headmistress?”

Lily made a thoughtful face, before laughing cheekily. “Wow, way to go way too far here, Threadneedle. All I was implying was that the Headmistress is pretty decent, and you seem to think so too. That’s what Joanne said. How did you jump from ‘she’s not so bad’ to ‘having the hots’ for her?”

At Sam’s obvious distress at possibly having outed herself to the girl, Lily sat up closer to her on the bed and held out a hand, which Sam took.

“You know I appreciate you? I always knew where I stood with you. From the get-go. There were people who were nice to me but ugly behind my back, but you were always genuine. Your heart said as much, hence your face said as much. Supportive and kind to a fault. A bleeding heart through and through, Sam. Are you giving Headmistress Nox a hard time now because she’s taking too long in making the decision on the whole scholarship situation?”

Sam was startled at the emotional maturity and intelligence the seventeen-year-old possessed.

“Lily, I just worry about you.”

“Look, she’s talked to me. Sat me down, and unlike many other folks in my life, she took the time to listen. People believe I’m some tragic character, but she didn’t assume anything. She asked about my folks and if they were supportive. What my childhood looked like. She never for a second treated me like a cliché. Sure, I’ve known her for all of three weeks, and she might still can Amanda and Suz and all the others by closing the scholarship loophole at Dragons, but I feel like at least she’s not treating us any differently because we’re gay or trans.”

Sam squeezed her hand gently. “I wish there was something we all could do though, kid.”

“Yeah, sitting and waiting thoroughly sucks. I feel like one of those characters in a romance novel, that’s just there, you know, no agency or anything. Just waiting for someone to do something and bam, it’s all roses. I mean, it’s pretty boring, unless there’s a major shake-up at like 80% of the book or some other fallout like a murder, or a natural or manmade disaster!”

Lily smiled, and while said smile was infectious and seemed genuine, Sam was sure her delightful silliness was meant to lighten the mood. But Sam remained serious and

unconvinced, prompting the girl to sigh and shake her head as if she was the teacher and Sam a recalcitrant student.

“The charter says what it says, teach. Scholarships aren’t a real institutionalized thing. Should they be? Heck yes! But for now, it’s all in Headmistress McHot’s hands. And I have a feeling even that is a stretch. The trustees and some of the parents have raised hell. She’s trying to walk a lot of lines here.”

“God, Lils, she shouldn’t be walking any lines when it comes to scholarships at all. Private schools have had scholarships since the beginning of time. Dragons was just always a bit weird about them, because the founders thought that if anyone can apply for scholarships it will...” Sam faltered.

Lily gave her a lopsided grin.

“It will dilute their blue blood? Expose their rich and fancy daughters to the masses of commoners? All true. I’m a legacy kid, teach. You’re forgetting that once upon a time my family had the money to pay for all of this, and the tuition here is not cheap at all. In fact, it is in the upper echelon of fees in New England. But, times, they are a-changing, as Dylan sang. And you know Amanda and I checked other schools and their fees—all of them—are out of our reach and we would not be able to stay together...”

Lily’s wise and rather too sanguine comments about her potential future were frightening to Sam.

“Kid, you and Amanda and Suzie have one year left, and with your grades and talents and skills, you will be able to apply to the best colleges in the country. You shouldn’t be seeking other high schools, you should be focusing on the now and on your talent, and maybe on getting up on those crutches and healing that leg there, missy.”

“Man, and they call it the optimism of youth. You’re not that young anymore, teach, to have these unrealistic beliefs. The world is a pretty place, and everything is rainbows and unicorns according to you. You’re making me into some kind of martyr when I refuse to be one. My life is my own. Amanda’s life is her own. So is Suzie’s.”

The girl shifted and wrapped her arms around herself tightly, before her eyes fell on the crutches that stood neatly by the bed within her reach, clearly placed there by Magdalene’s careful hands.

“Headmistress Nox has treated me and the rest of the scholarship kids pretty much like completely average students. Not once has she asked about me being trans, not when I transitioned, not how I transitioned. She wanted to know about my favorite subjects and what I planned to do after I graduate and if I was happy here. She asked about my relationship with my peers. Things an educator would ask pretty much any high-schooler. She allowed me to go on and on and on about Amanda and I think she thought I was sweet. I mean, who wouldn’t think I was sweet?”

A dimpled cheeky grin was contagious and Sam smiled in return.

“We talked about our favorite books and how, a long time ago, she wanted to be an artist too, but how she didn’t quite have the talent. She also told me that she wanted to be an actress once upon a time.”

Sam’s eyes went wide at the revelations that kept coming, but Lily soldiered on.

“Headmistress Fenway turned the scholarship students into some kind of battle flag, something to protect and rally around, but we’re just kids who want to be left alone to enjoy our lives. I can’t speak for the rest of the girls, but I haven’t had a bad one so far. My parents love me, my friends treasure me, my girlfriend finds me cute and funny and adorable and you have to admit, Sam, how many people can say they have it as good as I do?”

Sam's face colored for a completely different reason this time. Did she too, in her desire to protect and shield, make Lily feel like less? Did she diminish her individuality, when Lily herself was a wonderful bouquet of beautiful and amazing qualities? And hadn't she oftentimes felt the same in her days as a student at Dragons, when the whole world only saw her differences, her otherness, instead of seeing the person underneath.

"Would I like to have a little bit more agency in this story of my life? Sure. Would I like to have more say in the decisions that are being made regarding my tuition? Yes. And so do all the scholarship girls. But tell me, honestly, how much agency do you have? How much agency does Professor Dorsea have? I think the only true agency holder in this whole story of ours is Headmistress McHot." She said the last one with a barely held back grin, and Sam couldn't help but reciprocate in kind.

"I'm sorry, Lils."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

“Isn’t much you can do, teach. Maybe settle Fenway down a bit? I mean, she’s so belligerent, I fear she’ll start a war or something with Nox.”

Sam again wondered at how perceptive the kid was, and how she saw things that others were not privy to. But Lily interrupted her thoughts before she could say something idiotic or inappropriate.

“Hey, speaking of Headmistress McHot, wanna see my latest portrait? I think it turned out pretty great, if I do say so myself.”

Lily pulled out her ever-present sketch pad and there—in a completely realistic pencil rendering—sat Magdalene with an enigmatic look on her face.

“Yeah, I was kinda nervous when she stopped by to talk to me some time ago, and she saw the sketchbook and well..., you know my place in the dorm is all taped up with my drawings. So she asked if talking while drawing would be easier for me. This is the result.”

“This is amazing, Lily.”

“We’ve already established that I am rather amazing, Sam. Of course, this would be, too.”

Sam squeezed Lily’s hand and couldn’t help but feel utterly inadequate, both due to the blessing of having this kid in her life and for the woman who looked on at her from the portrait. She bid Lily a good day, promising to return with her lunch, and as she was making her way out of the room, the girl called her back.

“Oh, and teach? If you’re still trying to convince people that you’re not carrying whatever torch for the Headmistress, I’d learn to school my features better. You ain’t got a very good poker face. In fact, you don’t have one to save your life.”

Sam blanched and Lily laughed before sobering up quickly.

“I will never tell anyone, Sam. I swear. Never. I mean, maybe take it easy on the Chucks and flannel? But I don’t think anyone noticed and your secret is safe with me.”

All Sam could do is stare and shake her head in disbelief that this was her life these days.

10

Of Unstoppable Chemistry & Live Wires

The next few weeks passed in a blur of activity. Curriculum revisions were a battle, and Sam, Orla, and Joanne had their work cut out for them. For someone who hadn’t taught in years, Magdalene had been remarkably well-informed and prepared for anything they could throw her way. Pretty much all their arguments about the necessity of this or that subject were steadily rebuffed by her ironclad will, and she’d reason that, while having more was certainly better, their funding was scarce and hiring new teachers, or paying the existing ones more to take up new classes was simply not possible.

Sam wondered how they had managed to expand their curriculum to such luxury items as Russian language courses, and the Role of Film in American History in the past five years. She felt disloyal even thinking this way, but one evening she stayed behind and simply asked Magdalene.

If she thought that the Headmistress would smirk and tease her about her potentially jumping ship, she was dead wrong. Magdalene simply sat her down and walked her through the stark picture last year's budgetary spreadsheets presented. The school was in dire red. And the additional cost of hiring a Russian teacher, who was part-time, but—due to the nature of the job and the location of the school—required full room, board, transportation costs, and per diem while on the island was sheer madness.

“The idea that the school has to offer every subject in order to be competitive is flawed. We have to provide just enough to make sure we satisfy the existing requirement. What assessments were done to find out if Russian was a real need at Dragons and not something benefiting only a few students?”

Magdalene's voice was quiet, so it was the scent that made Sam look up from where she was bent over the large spreadsheets, only to find the Headmistress precariously close to her. The wild jasmine that she'd begun to associate with a person rather than a place, wrapped itself around Sam's senses like a lover. The fragrance was subtle, and could only be noticed if Magdalene stepped decidedly into Sam's personal space, as she had in that moment. And then it hit her, wild jasmine... The wild jasmine on the Amber Dragon Cliff... The favorite hiding place that Magdalene shared with Sam... Her signature perfume.

Sam rolled her eyes at being so damn slow sometimes. Now that she knew about Magdalene's six months at Dragons, her attachment to the scent was such a tell, it surprised Sam she had not figured it out before.

And yet, if the Headmistress was out for revenge against the Academy that had discarded her, she had a strange way of showing it, by choosing something so intrinsic to the very core of the school as a fragrance that was so ever-present here. Sam thought that this woman was a puzzle that she'd never tire of putting together.

She looked sideways at the chiseled profile, the sharp cheekbones, and the sensuous full lips that moved with some insightful explanation or other related to the budget, and thought that it would not take very much to fall for her. Not when Magdalene was power and grace and brilliance, easily put on display like this.

She was showing Sam the column for the Russian class expenditures that had three students enrolled in it and required more funding than the Spanish class—which had over fifty students from several grade levels participating, yet cost much less, because Ms. Rodriguez lived on the island and was a full-time employee, also doubling as part-time resident faculty. Lost in her explanation, Magdalene extended a hand and tucked a strand of Sam’s hair that had escaped her braid behind her ear, and the gesture was so sweet and gentle and painfully familiar, despite the fact that Magdalene had only done so once before.

Unbidden came the images of Magdalene’s legs wrapped around Sam’s waist, as Magdalene had sat in her lap, her face a picture of ecstasy, her hips moving with slow precision, riding Sam’s hand wedged between them, her hands on Sam’s face, and then suddenly reaching out and tucking a sweaty flyaway strand of hair behind her ear. That gesture, coupled with the subtle scent, brought back memories of their night together, and Sam was fairly certain it was written all over her features.

Their faces were close, in their positions of leaning over the table, and as their eyes met, the connection that was always just under the surface, sparked to life. Sam licked her lips instinctively, and Magdalene lowered her eyes following the movement of Sam’s tongue. She swallowed loudly and Sam knew that 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 in the space of those hours.

She often thought that one night was a very short period of time when all was said and done. Yet the amount of influence that particular night had had on Sam’s life was

hard to comprehend, the sheer enormity of it was overwhelming. If Sam's existence was a motionless and murky pond, replete with boredom and sameness, that night in Manhattan with Magdalene shattered that calm with a force of a thousand pebbles being thrown across its surface. The reverberations just kept coming. What had once been still water, was now dangerously alive, showing Sam depths of herself, she had never imagined she had.

Did Magdalene know? Could she sense how much Sam had been changed by their one encounter? How their one night pulled and tugged at the very fabric of her being? Perhaps she did, because by all accounts the otherwise aloof and cold woman had never been anything but passionate and approachable with Sam. In fact, she had gone out of her way to seek Sam out again and again.

A gentle hand landed on Sam's cheek and the thumb caressed her cheekbone once, twice before the hand slid forward and the fingers delved into the short hairs on her nape, holding her head in place.

Movement outside the door and loud shouts jolted them out of their cocoon of intimacy, and they sprung apart as if scalded, Magdalene yanking her hand out of Sam's hair with a painful tug, a ring getting snagged in it.

She sent Sam a thoroughly distressed and apologetic look just as George banged on the door and opened it at the same moment. Her hands held a bouquet of dead flowers.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

“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!”

Undeterred by Sam’s utterly perplexed countenance, George deposited the wilted roses on the table right on top of the spreadsheet they’d been leaning over. But before Sam could ask what the hell was going on, Magdalene just waved Sam off with a careless shrug and a dismissive gesture.

“The Old Dragonettes have been making their feelings known about some of the reforms that 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?” Outraged, Sam grabbed the flowers, looking for any indication that they had a note or a clue as to the sender. “This is harassment!”

“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’s laughter held no merriment.

“No, neither is okay, but Orla is being upfront. And what’s this about a rat?”

“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!” Shaking with fury, Sam could not find words to describe her inner turmoil.

“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.”

“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.” The word and the tone were mocking, and they burned Sam like acid. The contrast between the woman who had been threading her fingers in her hair and sharing her breath moments ago, and the one going toe-to-toe with her right now—with sarcasm and derision—was stark.

“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 at the implication that, had Orla wanted to, she easily could have gotten a dead rat into Magdalene’s office. Still, there was absolutely no doubt in Sam’s mind that the former headmistress had nothing to do with whatever was happening here.

“How long has this been going on?”

“It started sometime after Lily sprained her ankle on those wet tiles.” Sam did not miss the inflection Magdalene had put on the way Lily had ended up on crutches. In the weeks that had passed since that incident, Sam had tried to find some sort of explanation to either the water on the floor or the suddenly out-of-order lights, but nothing reasonable had come to mind. With no further incidents, Sam had allowed herself to simply forget the weird chain of events that had led to the girl getting hurt. Perhaps she shouldn’t have.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“For all we knew, it could have been you, Sam.” George’s voice made both of them flinch. Sam had forgotten she was in the room with them. Judging by Magdalene’s expression, so had she, though she recovered quickly.

“George is joking.” Magdalene’s voice was gentle as she finally turned away from Sam and moved to look out the window into the pouring rain, pelting the glass in rivulets.

Sam looked from Magdalene’s ramrod straight back to George, who hastily amended. “Yeah, I’m joking, Sam, of course. But this is getting out of hand.”

“The police—”

“And what will we say?” George threw her hands in the air and stalked around the room. “That we are receiving wilted flowers? Hardly a crime.”

“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.”

Sam felt the words like a physical blow. Could Magdalene really suspect that she would do something like this?

George made a huge production of dragging the massive bouquet out of the office and shutting the door, but Magdalene did not turn from the window. Her shoulders suddenly seemed so fragile to Sam, slim and vulnerable, despite her rigid posture.

Sam approached her and they stood side by side, mirrored in the dark glass, looking at the storm outside.

“I would have never done... that.” Sam stumbled over the word, but Magdalene did not seem to notice, she simply shook her head.

“I never thought you would. That last comment about taking things on faith. It wasn’t about you. 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.” Magdalene’s nose wrinkled in that characteristic manner as she went on. “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.” Her face reflected in the dark window was impassive, watching Sam with a cool, detached expression in eyes that were more glacial blue than warm amber.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

“You mean...” Sam couldn’t even bring herself to voice what she thought Magdalene meant.

“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.”

Shaken, Sam turned around to face Magdalene fully, and when the Headmistress didn’t immediately turn to look at her, Sam grabbed her by the fragile shoulders she’d admired just a moment ago 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?” Words were failing her now when she felt it was essential for her to get her point across. “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!”

“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 under Sam’s touch.

“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.” Her face was impassive, but the eyes were wounded and haunted, and Sam desperately wanted to erase that look from the face that was so beautiful when lit up by a smile.

“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 expected, a corner of the sensuous mouth twitched and the eyes lost that pained sheen.

“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.”

But Sam was done talking about assholes, presidential or otherwise, because she heard something that she had been desperate to hear from those lips since the first time their eyes met in the dim lighting of the Manhattan bar.

“Say it again.”

Magdalene gave her a puzzled look, and then her whole face transformed and the look of sheer desire that Sam had seen earlier—before the ugly interruption—crossed those striking features again.

“Sam... Sam...” The fingers that had played with her hair before, rose again, but then, halfway up to Sam’s face, they stopped and Magdalene took a step back, the graceful hand falling limp to her side.

“I can’t, Sam. And I won’t apologize for why.”

“Magdalene...” Sam wanted to howl at the moon that was currently obscured by the storm clouds, but the woman in front of her just shook her head, refusing to acknowledge the longing in Sam’s voice.

“You might’ve forgotten, in the hormone overload that just took place here, but while we’ve established my nascent trust of 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 took a step forward, but Magdalene simply 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?” With anger and lust clouding her mind, Sam belatedly realized what she’d said.

“I believe this conversation is over, Professor Threadneedle.” The eyes that had looked at her with such heat and passion just moments ago were flat and unreadable in their cold austerity.

Sam thought to argue, to apologize for her outburst, and to plead her case, except she didn’t have much of one. She knew Magdalene was right, and that she herself did not fully trust her. Nor did she approve of the abrupt measures to cull the school of all that had been enacted in the previous years—not all of which was bad or unnecessary in Sam’s eyes. But a heart wants what a heart wants, and Sam’s heart—and some other very vocal parts of her—wanted Magdalene. Wanted this maddening, infuriating, and strikingly beautiful woman to keep looking at her with heat and desire and to cross some of those lines.

* * *

She walked in the rain, taking the circuitous route despite the frigid wind chilling her

to the bone. Sam thought that getting drenched in a storm wasn't a pastime she usually indulged in, but it seemed fitting somehow after the conversation she'd just had. She had no idea why, but Magdalene had pushed absolutely all her buttons and seemed to know exactly which ones hurt most. Moreover, she awoke feelings and cravings in Sam that she'd never even considered before. Magdalene made her dream, asleep and awake, about things that Sam had never considered possible for herself. She wanted, and that want, ebbing and flowing, was always there in the background, guiding her thoughts. The eerie sensation she'd been experiencing since they'd met that auspicious night in Manhattan had never truly gone away. The familiarity, the knowledge of one another that went deeper than physical.

She stopped on what she'd now thought was their Dragon Cliff, despite it being hers and hers alone for years. When had she started thinking of it in those terms? Thunder rumbled in the distance over the vast and tumultuous expanse of the ocean, and it resonated in her own heart, now split in two between her loyalty to the one and only home she'd ever known—along with all the quirks and people it held—and the one woman who was encroaching closer to taking possession of it. Sam pondered—flicking back the wet tendrils of her hair from her face—that she'd never known love before. Not that she fancied herself in love now. Absolutely not and under no circumstances. It would be utterly foolish to fall for someone who might be responsible for the destruction of Dragons. And yet, when she was with Magdalene, she had a certain sense that was similar to standing on the Amber Dragon, a sense of belonging. Could a person—not a place—be a home after all?

She had no answers, and for once, her— their—Dragon did not soothe her. With lightning splitting the sky behind her, she headed back, stopping before the wet stoop of the faculty dormitory's back entrance, when she noticed that Lily's window was dark. Too early for that troublemaker to be asleep. She must have gone to hang out with the rest of the scholarship crowd who were spending their summer at Dragons. Troublemaker indeed. Sam knew at least two of the girls had mile-wide crushes on Lily, despite her having a girlfriend. Deep in her thoughts she lost her footing and

stumbled into a rather large puddle, getting her shoes and jeans thoroughly drenched.

Cursing her own distractedness, Sam quickly marched into her apartment and subsequently her bathroom, taking her clothes off as she went. A hot shower restored her spirits somewhat.

She'd settled down with a book, keeping an ear out for Lily's imminent return, when the lights flickered and died, leaving her in complete darkness. A noise as if something had fallen, and what she thought was the sound of her name being called from the back porch, had her scrambling out of bed in seconds, hastily foregoing her still wet shoes and stepping into her rubber boots.

Clinging to walls and railings in the dark, Sam found herself on the porch, utterly alone, except for the howling wind tearing through the long-suffering pines surrounding the campus. She grabbed ahold of the railing, squinting to see better and cursing herself for forgetting her flashlight when she felt something under her fingertips that had no business being on the cold metal of the steel banister. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness and with bolts of lightning occasionally illuminating the sky, Sam finally saw a thin stretch of plastic cable had wrapped itself along the wet rail. Straightening to see where the cable led, Sam was suddenly aware that it was sparking slightly in several places, perilously close to her hand. She jerked back just as another bolt of lightning struck nearby and, seeking purchase, her hands instinctively grabbed the nearest thing, her fingers clutching what turned out to be a live wire, while standing in a mass of rainwater in the middle of a thunderstorm.

“Hey, teach!”

With her breath stuck in her throat, Sam could barely get a hoarse shout out of her mouth.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

“No, stay back, don’t come close to me... to the porch. Stay there. Don’t move, Lily.”

The girl stopped immediately, either due to the ingrained instinct of listening to a teacher’s authoritarian tone or due to the sheer despair in Sam’s voice.

Sam could tell she was fumbling with her crutches, and suddenly a beam of light from Lily’s phone tore through the darkness.

“Ah, Sam, how sturdy are those rubber boots?” Lily’s voice was tremulous. “I mean if I remember my physics right—and I may as well have just daydreamed about Amanda all through that class for all the good it did to me—you should be okay, wearing rubber and all that? Right?”

The question at the end was said in such a hopeful, almost childlike voice that it snapped Sam out of her stupor. She was the adult here, and her fear was not helping matters.

“Yeah, I’m not sure. I think since I’m insulated in these boots, I should be okay. I will let go of the wire carefully now.”

“How can you not be sure? You’re a teacher?” Lily’s face in the dark was showing all her derision for Sam’s level of understanding of physics.

“I’m almost sure and I’m a mathematician, not a physicist. But here we go in proving my hypothesis.” She slowly lifted her fingers from the railing and the wire uncoiled like a snake, making several unpredictable twists and turns, and came to a perilous

stop, hanging limply and now sparking right next to Sam. She gulped and gave Lily a hopefully reassuring look. “See? All good. But don’t come close or touch me, I’m not entirely certain this is the only one hanging loose around here. Who knows if this century-old wiring is up to whatever the current code for these things is. And what you’re wearing isn’t good enough.”

“Excuse me? These are the latest Jordans, teach, do not insult the GOAT himself.”

“Lils, they don’t have rubber soles, is what I’m saying. Whatever plastic alloy they are, it’s not good enough. It has to be industrial or construction-grade rubber to properly insulate, this much I’m sure of. And I’m a Celtics girl, so I’m not a big Jordan fan myself...”

“As charming as basketball talk is, shouldn’t you two be having this conversation indoors and out of this storm?” Magdalene’s voice interrupted their banter and two voices rang out with a different degree of desperation.

“Don’t come closer!”

“Stay back!”

After illuminating Sam holding still in the middle of the puddle with a live wire sparking mere centimeters away from her, Lily turned her phone flashlight to reveal a pale Magdalene, whose face was a picture of silent horror.

11

Of Nerdlike Knowledge, Hotness Factors & Fairytales

“You still think this is all nothing?” Magdalene’s voice was like a barbed wire, taut and jagged.

Fresh from her shower and safely ensconced in her apartment, Sam's adrenaline levels finally began to level out.

"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."

The look Sam received was equal parts bewildered and amused.

"Did you just say 'noggin'? Did I hear you right?" Magdalene came closer and tangled a gentle hand in Sam's drying hair. Her shower had been quick and unsatisfying since, with the power still out until the town electrician could fix the wires, the water heater wasn't working. The emergency generator had kicked in after an hour of desperate attempts to start it, but only the vital areas of the school were back to normal, and Sam's room was illuminated by a few candles.

"Your strange and antiquated use of language aside, I think you're forgetting a major clue here, Elektra." Magdalene's voice was low, and in the candlelight, she looked almost ethereal. Sam lost herself in the feeling of those gentle fingers combing through her hair and that seductive husky tone overloading her already electrified system. She grinned, pleased with her own mental pun, but could not let Magdalene's mangling of one of her favorite comic books slide.

"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—"

A cool finger on her lips shut her up in a second.

“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 the lingering finger. With a wicked grin, Magdalene booped her on the nose and triumphantly stepped back.

“Okay,” Sam whispered and licked her lips, still feeling the lingering touch. “You just got a hundred hot points.”

That earned her a chuckle.

“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, a bit of relief after a fraught day and an even worse evening.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

“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 beckoned and Magdalene finally relented, stopped her pacing, and sat down on the bed beside her.

“I think there’s more to it than keeping pace with snot-nosed rascals.” Sam looked at her lap where Magdalene’s hand had taken her own, their fingers intertwined.

“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 spoke in that slightly aloof tone that gave away nothing, not an ounce of genuine emotion, but her fingers trembled slightly in Sam’s grip, and Sam wondered what kinds of things Magdalene had seen and if she would ever tell her more. The conversation also made her think of the book she herself carried everywhere she went.

“You have the most peculiar expression right now.” At Magdalene’s words, Sam raised her head from staring at their intertwined fingers to find the other woman watching her with curiosity.

“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 extremely 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.”

She reluctantly stood up—pleased when Magdalene’s fingers tightened on hers before letting go—and pulled the slim tome she always carried with her from the 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?” At Magdalene’s slow shake of her head, 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, aware that she had meandered too far from her point. But Magdalene continued to look at her, with patience and a touch of warmth in her eyes.

“You’re the book,” Sam blurted artlessly, and the warmth turned to mirth with

Magdalene, accepting the book with a smile.

“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 she could tell Magdalene was teasing her.

“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.”

The mirth was gone from the bi-colored eyes that suddenly held a deep sadness in them. Placing the book on the bedside table, Magdalene rose from the bed, and Sam felt her absence as if she was missing a limb.

“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.”

“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 further away, putting more distance between them, and Sam thought that this little glimpse into her heart, into her life, was over, and they were back to being colleagues discussing a difficult situation. Not quite strangers, but with nothing to bind them and nothing to hold them. Magdalene had closed the book for tonight.

“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 tried for a joke, but it didn’t land with Magdalene standing ramrod straight—in what Sam had

learned was a characteristic pose—shoulders rigid and her arms wrapped tightly around her torso.

“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.”

“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.”

“So what you’re saying is...” Sam shook her head in disbelief, afraid to even voice what she thought Magdalene was hinting at.

“What I’m saying is, I’m not at all certain you’re the one these attacks have been aimed at.”

It dawned on Sam that she’d been completely unaware of Magdalene’s living arrangements. With Orla staying at her cottage on the fringes of the campus for twenty years, it was easy to forget that the designated Headmistress’ quarters were actually right here, in this very building. And that, unlike Orla, Magdalene was actually availing herself of them.

“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?”

Sam knew that she probably looked like a guppy, her mouth hanging open in a pretty

realistic reinterpretation of the fish, but she couldn't quite compute what was happening. How was this even remotely real life?

“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?”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

Magdalene's face was dispassionate, almost disinterested while Sam spoke, but the eyes looked right at her, and was there just a touch of the proverbial green in them? Sam chose to ignore it since it was so preposterous that Magdalene Nox would be jealous of David Uttley of all people. Still, as Sam's outburst came to an end, she noted the tense muscles in Magdalene's jaw relaxed incrementally.

"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 opened her mouth to contradict her, but Magdalene simply overrode her.

"Sam, I've had veiled threats and dead rats sent to me. Why do you think it is unreasonable that some Old Dragonette, or one of the current ones for that matter, would wish me harm?"

"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 was silent, standing still and watching the storm rage outside. Sam got up and laid a careful hand on the unyielding shoulder. So fragile yet so tense, she thought it might snap at any moment under her touch.

"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—"

Like a tornado unleashed, Magdalene whirled on her, shaking off Sam's hand in an instance of pure, fiery anger.

"And so I deserve to die?" Her face contorted in a mask of unadulterated anguish, Magdalene tried to get past her, but Sam knew that, if she let her go now, she'd forever regret the foolish way in which she'd verbalized her concern. She caught Magdalene's wrist, looking at the tumultuous face for permission, and when it was granted by a subtle nod, Sam tugged at it until Magdalene was enveloped in her arms and simply held her gently yet firmly.

"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. 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..."

Magdalene shrugged and Sam immediately let her go, but she hadn't moved entirely out of the embrace, just far enough to glare daggers right into Sam's eyes.

"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."

Sam recoiled as if slapped.

"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 look, studying Sam's face, the worry line between her brows smoothed out. Her eyes slowly lost their wild look, becoming more amber than blue, in a way that Sam was beginning to understand showed more positive than negative emotions, before she nodded once, very seriously, as if settling the matter once and for all.

“I believe you.”

Hearing those words lifted a weight off Sam's shoulders she was not aware she'd borne. To know that Magdalene believed her, trusted her enough to know that Sam didn't wish her harm, was liberating. No matter how adversarial her relationship with Magdalene was out there, here—behind closed doors in this small safe space, crammed chock-full of books—Sam knew they were on the same side. A side that allowed Magdalene to remain still and relaxed in the embrace, and let Sam simply hold her, gently caressing her sides, feeling the sinew and bones under her fingertips. This small reminder of Magdalene's fragility, of how vulnerable she really was, despite her unbreakable will and powerful presence, made Sam's heart stutter in her chest. Worry clouded her mind, worry and desire to shield, to protect, to cherish... And ultimately—like every other time they'd spent any significant amount of time together—any desire that Sam had towards this woman would turn hot and burning, raw and hungry.

Their eyes met, and Sam knew that her face, once again, spoke volumes about what was on her mind, but for some reason, today, now, Magdalene did not run, did not step back, did not turn away. They both hovered for what felt like an eternity, just a breath away from each other before Magdalene's hands delved into Sam's hair, further disheveling it and finally bringing their faces closer, crushing their mouths

together.

The kiss wasn't tender. It managed to be sharp, abrading all the barely concealed emotions Sam had been hiding for months. It excoriated her with heat and passion; it unraveled her with strength and precision, and then it delivered solace as Magdalene's lips gentled, caressed instead of unnerved, allayed instead of frightened, and gave instead of taking.

The power of the kiss never changed though, and the hands in her hair did not ease their grip. Magdalene settled into the exchange, allowing Sam to first become an equal participant before taking over fully, giving all of herself, and taking all of Sam, as much or perhaps even more than she had in Manhattan. A swipe of Sam's tongue drew out a moan that resonated somewhere on the most basic of levels, and it was now Sam's turn to demand, to take, to bruise. Magdalene, pliant in her arms, vibrated like the live wire Sam had held in her hands just an hour ago. Sam found the similarities tantalizing—just as deadly, just as heady.

And then, when Sam surfaced to draw in a breath, the kiss coming to a natural conclusion, Magdalene did step away from her, putting several feet between them. She didn't have to though, Sam thought, because the look in her eyes spoke volumes, and no amount of physical distance between them could compensate for that stubborn set of her sharp jaw.

"I know, you can't..." But in another characteristic gesture, Magdalene flicked her wrist, silencing her.

"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 she had no earthly idea what she might say. Magdalene had been right all along. They were on different sides, and in Sam’s mind, things were blurring very quickly, her own loyalties, her own desires coming to a head. And yes, she knew what risk they were running by being together like this. But the words hurt, hurt much more than Sam had thought they would. Of course, she knew that, if they were caught, it would probably spell the end of Magdalene’s stewardship at Dragons. Of course, she understood that, as an ambitious woman whose career was obviously very important to her, Magdalene valued it to the point where she wouldn’t throw it all away for...

For what exactly? What was she even offering to Magdalene? Confused and yet still inexplicably hurt, Sam raised her eyes to see Magdalene watching her again. She had that uncanny habit of just looking, being utterly still, and simply taking a person in, like she was an observer and not a participant in any particular scene. It was unnerving, and yet Sam felt like there must be a reason.

Magdalene seemed to go through life very much detached from it, looking in from the outside, at least to Sam’s mind. Joanne had, if not in so many words, as good as confessed that the girl had not belonged at the school for many reasons. The school trustees had thought it unfeasible to keep her on, despite good grades and stellar performance in all other areas. Timothy had implied that he’d never managed to get her to fully immerse herself in their marriage, George had intimated that Magdalene had gone from school to school seeking success and glory... Untethered, for reasons distinct from Sam’s, but perhaps it was this quality of being adrift that had brought the two of them together, two lost souls, belonging nowhere.

Except that was absolutely not how Magdalene was with her. Sam had been perfectly truthful when she’d interrupted Magdalene’s self-recriminations by saying that she felt privileged to be let in as much as she was. Ever since they’d met, reluctantly, and

step by small step, Magdalene had immersed herself in their interactions, from calming Sam in the elevator, to making love, to spending their evenings on the cliff. The only times she'd retreated was when she had denied their connection or tried to. Like she was doing now, standing rigid and unmoving, except for her ever-watchful beautiful eyes. Cold. Austere. Unapproachable even if Sam wanted to touch her, she knew Magdalene, in these moments, was like an impregnable fortress on a deeper level. Sam would be unable to reach her even if she tried.

Untouchable and untouched, Magdalene looked at Sam once again and without saying another word quietly left the room. If not for the subtle scent of wild jasmine and the tingling of her lips, Sam would be hard-pressed to believe that she hadn't been an apparition, a dream.

Unbidden Sam's gaze fell to the book still lying on her bedside table. The Light Princess, a story about a woman untethered by gravity, by reality, by the world, who could not find her place in it and who was saved by love, giving her ground and weight and safe haven. A Prince had come and fallen in love with her, figuring out how to offer her all that she needed to take her first steps on solid ground.

Since discovering the story, Sam thought that she'd seen herself among those semi-ruined pages. Now standing in the stillness of her room, breathing in the scent of the woman who had been holding her mind and heart captive for months, Sam thought that the Light Princess may not have been about her all along.

Of Soy Milk & Hero Felines

The next morning at breakfast, after her usual early run, Sam found herself in the strange situation of being entirely alone in the Mess Hall, despite it being her regular repast hour. She'd seen Joanne in the faculty dormitory earlier, the two of them crossing paths at Lily's, checking in on the girl after their adventure last night.

Sam was not surprised that the story about the live wire and potential electrocution had spread like wildfire, with everyone at school being not only fully apprised, but making damn sure the rumors grew exponentially by the hour. The way Joanne had retold the story back to Sam and Lily—as the girl was excitedly bouncing around her room helped by a single crutch—had made it seem like they'd waded knee-deep through massive electrically charged rivers, overflowing and drowning them both while simultaneously electrocuting them.

“Oh, the drama of gossip and teenagers.” Sam had just shaken her head and taken a better look at Lily's gait. She was coming along nicely, according to the still sullen Doctor Franz. Once an asshole...

Joanne had announced that she'd be going to the mainland later today and wouldn't be attending breakfast, or as she'd put it 'saving her appetite for all the donuts she could eat at Dunkin' in Boston'.

“Orla came by earlier since she has a meeting with Headmistress Nox later about the history classes curriculum.”

“That’s a meeting that’s bound to go down like a lead balloon,” piped up Lily from the bathroom where a toothbrush could still be heard whirring.

“Lily!” both Sam and Joanne yelled at the same time and exchanged equally exasperated glances.

“What? Fenway hates Nox, ‘cause she thinks she is destroying her legacy at the school out of spite, and Nox doesn’t care about anything Fenway thinks. Plus Nox is hot and Fenway feels her alpha bitch position is under threat. But that’s ‘cause both of them are alpha bitches, is what I’m saying.” The sweet face, smudged in toothpaste on the corners of the mouth, peered into the room innocently.

Both Sam and Joanne just stared at her, completely floored. Smiling sweetly, Lily wiped her mouth with her sleeve, and both of her teachers winced. She regaled them with a sheepish but unrepentant look. Feeling like she had to say something because even for a senior, Lily’s assessment crossed into highly disrespectful, Sam took it upon herself to step in.

“That’s ‘Headmistress Nox’ and ‘Professor Fenway’ to you, missy.”

To her surprise, Joanne laughed.

“That’s what you take issue with, Sammy? Out of all the psycho-babble this little egghead has just thrown our way?”

“I resemble that remark,” Lily shouted in mock outrage.

“Ha, which one? The one about you making assumptions about people you have no business assuming anything about, or the one where Joanne said you were an egghead?”

Lily looked at her, stumped, and now it was Sam's turn to laugh.

"Gotcha, kiddo."

Before either of them could continue their bickering, Joanne stood up.

"Sammy, my baby, she has the right to draw any and all conclusions about anyone. But Lily, my other baby, you have zero right to gossip about people. It's not polite and in this case—especially in your case—dangerous to you, love. Keep your opinions to yourself."

Lily had the good sense to look sheepish and remorseful. Sam just closed her eyes and shook her head. Joanne was right, and they all needed to be a lot more circumspect in what they said and where they said it.

With Lily pronouncing herself not hungry—or more likely waiting for the other boarding school girls to wake up closer to brunch time—and Joanne departing for the mainland, Sam ended up preparing her first cup of coffee from the communal table where the Mess Hall staff had set out all the trappings, her movements mechanical at this point; three-thirds of liquid gold poured into a massive mug, two chunks of brown sugar followed by a generous splash of milk from the jug kept warm on a special burner.

She sat facing the grand glass windows overlooking the school's back garden, where sparsely planted flowers and bushes ran into the forests that fully inhabited that part of the island. It was a beautiful morning, and Sam enjoyed the sights and sounds. She inhaled the steam from her mug deeply, but for some reason, it did not evoke the same mouthwatering response today. Given her level of distraction, Sam didn't find the lack of her usual olfactive reaction surprising. She was about to take her first deep swallow of her one major addiction—if she didn't count a certain Headmistress who was rapidly becoming coffee's massive rival in terms of how much Sam seemed to

need her presence in her life—when raised female voices sounded from the foyer.

Well, one voice was raised, the other was at first not clear, but as the women progressed closer to the Mess Hall, Sam could finally discern it. Orla was shouting, her ire loud and clear in several chosen expletives. None of the said expletives were exceptionally bad, but all were angry. Magdalene was answering calmly. At least an untrained observer would think it was calm, as coolness laced her deadly tone. But Sam was not an untrained observer anymore where Magdalene Nox was concerned. She had come to know those subtle inflections of the beloved, husky voice, and she knew Magdalene was distressed, with a large splash of annoyance thrown into the mix.

The voices warred outside the doors to the Mess Hall for several minutes, when Orla finally seemed to lose her cool entirely and with a parting, “you will regret this,” Sam heard her comfortable sneakers squeak away on the polished granite floors.

The doors opened, and Magdalene’s arrival was heralded by Willoughby, whose absence from his morning pillow on the windowsill Sam had noted earlier. The tomcat seemed to be bewitched by the Headmistress and had proven to be her shadow, completely abandoning his routine of chasing sunspots that he had honed over the course of years. Instead he was following Magdalene around the school, incapable of being separated from her. It was doubly funny to Sam, who had often heard Magdalene grumble about the ‘mangy cat’ and how he ‘should be put outside’ and ask ‘why was there so much hair everywhere?’ She had also seen her scratch his ears absentmindedly as she read or conducted calls, or feed him delicious morsels from her own plate. She was such an adorable fraud, honestly, who did she think she was fooling with her professed outrage over the presence of a cat who was completely enamored with her? It was obvious that the massive crush was entirely mutual, no matter how loudly Magdalene professed to hate cats.

Wearing a lovely pinstriped skirt, one of those tight pencil ones that hugged her hips

and ended just below her knees, the slits allowing the thighs to peak tantalizingly as she walked, Magdalene was a vision.

Well, what else was new? Sam had believed her to be a vision even with disheveled hair and smudged makeup, mussed and ravished in the early hours of dawn, with only the dim light of the Manhattan street below trickling into the small hotel room. Perhaps Sam thought her even more appealing then because she had been the one doing the disheveling and the ravishing and the makeup smudging. But this Magdalene had an allure of tantalizing unapproachability, and Sam just licked her suddenly dry lips and watched her stroll in with that brisk yet sensual gait of hers, belying the four-inch heels she wore, that made her legs go for days.

As always, her thoughts must have been written all over her face, because Magdalene raised one perfectly groomed eyebrow and the corners of her lips twitched before she schooled her face into its usual haughty expression. When had arrogance become so attractive to Sam? She wanted to tell herself she had no idea, but she was certain that it had a lot to do with a certain redhead whose hips swayed as she doctored her coffee and made her way down to where Sam lounged.

“You look comfortable, Professor Threadneedle.” The slightly raspy voice did more to awaken Sam than the aroma wafting from her coffee mug.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

“Good morning to you too, Headmistress Nox.” Sam inclined her head towards the doors. “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 the mug in front of herself. Immediately, Willoughby made his presence known 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, 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, relieved when she could see that the strain around Magdalene’s eyes was starting to smooth out.

“What did the electrician have to say?” Not ready to hear, again, about the shortcomings of the woman she cared for deeply, Sam tried to steer the conversation away from Orla.

“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 was so disconcerted by what she had heard, she honestly couldn't quite believe her ears, it was simply too outlandish. And asking was a better option than jumping to conclusions.

"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 at Magdalene and felt her shoulders relax slightly. So whoever was after the Headmistress, or Sam—since she wasn't yet convinced of the former—wasn't homicidal.

"Just malicious then."

"Yes, not murderous." Magdalene seemed to echo her thoughts, and they sat in silence for a moment, contemplating the recent revelations. Just as Magdalene raised her mug to her lips, Willoughby screeched like he was being skinned and gave her leg a mighty headbutt.

"He seems hungry?"

"He seems particularly unpleasant this morning. Not that a cat is pleasant in general."

"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.” Her tone was pure evil, but at the same time Magdalene looked around as if trying to find something suitable to feed him, obviously already forgetting that she was supposed to act as if she hated the cat. The sausages on the breakfast buffet seemingly appealed and as she got up to get him some, Willoughby suddenly jumped up on the table with a speed and agility that belied his massive bulk, and within a second upended Magdalene’s mug.

Sam jumped, her hand scalded by the hot beverage, and Magdalene was by her side instantly, hissing at Willoughby, who appeared utterly 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, Magdalene pulled her to the side table and tossed all the pats of butter from the bowl of ice cubes they’d been chilling in. Adroitly, and before Sam could fully understand what was happening, she had her scalded palm full of ice and was wincing and whimpering under the gaze of the bi-colored eyes, which held both worry and gentleness.

“This sucks, the cold hurts more than the hot coffee, I swear.” Sam shuddered, but Magdalene held her hand firmly, her own fingers closing over Sam’s fist.

“I would not have taken you for a wimp, Professor. What would your students think?” The tone was teasing and playful, but the eyes stayed gentle and Sam wanted to smile. She wanted to reach out and smooth the line between those expressive eyebrows. Wanted to taste the corner of that generous mouth. She simply wanted. And having Magdalene’s hands on her skin again was worth the burn and more.

“Not a wimp exactly...” It was time to change the subject because Sam was not about to confess how much of a big baby she was trying not to be. Her eyes fell on the spread in front of her, and a glass bottle half full of ivory liquid with a haphazardly scratched off label, standing behind the tea kettles and coffee thermos caught her eye.

“Well, this might explain why my coffee didn’t quite taste as usual.”

Magdalene followed her line of sight, and her face fell. Pale and frozen, her fingers slipped off Sam’s hand and she visibly recoiled from the side table.

Sam looked back at the mess on their table, her own coffee mug cooling rapidly amidst the wreckage. She picked it up again 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.” But Magdalene’s face still looked frozen in shock.

“Is it soy milk, Sam?”

Sam, her hand entirely forgotten, moved to the buffet table, picked up the bottle, and read the remnants of the label. Soy milk indeed. She took a sip from both the bottle and the milk jug, trying to compare.

“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 back from Sam, who was still holding the bottle with the semi-torn label, and gave Willoughby a long look, before extending her hand which he took as an invitation to pad towards it and curl into.

“I’m allergic to soy, Sam.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

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 up 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 heart was beating double time now. Wet tiles, electricity, and now soy milk? Combine all this with dead rats and wilted flowers, and a gruesome pattern was obviously emerging.

"Not enough to kill me, but you would have had to be very quick in your dash for my EpiPen."

"Shit." Sam sat down, oblivious to the mess she was settling amidst.

"Eloquent, but apt." Magdalene seemed to gravitate towards her, her hip perching against the now wrecked table. "Orla had her coffee mug with her." Sam raised her eyes sharply to her, as Magdalene went on, "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 10 AM. 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.”

“Dammit, Sam!” Magdalene pushed off from the table and paced away from her, her tone indignant. On the windowsill, the awoken Willoughby meowed in displeasure, either at the raised voices or at his mistress being upset. If Sam was a betting woman, she’d put good money on the latter.

“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.” Her cheeks pinked, and Sam shook her head at Magdalene being a prima donna and letting everyone know about 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.”

“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 wanted to point out that it was pretty hypocritical of someone allergic to soy to assume the cat wasn’t also allergic, but she observed the woman give the cat a completely enamored tummy caress and just rolled her eyes. A battle for another day. Except Magdalene’s next comment totally took the cake on this already weird morning.

“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.

“You took Willoughby to the vet?”

“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.”

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.”

Judging by the intensifying blush on Magdalene’s cheekbones, Sam had hit the nail on the head. Instantly enchanted, Sam felt her heart skip a beat. Every time she thought she had this woman figured out, she kept surprising her.

Obviously done with being sappy, Magdalene approached her briskly, all business, and gently picked up her 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 caressed the slightly red skin of the palm, and Sam promptly forgot about any lingering pain. The tender fingertips touched and prodded around the burn, and Sam discovered that her hands were a rather erogenous zone after all. Or really, any place Magdalene touched on her body turned into an erogenous zone.

Shaking herself out of her reverie, Sam met Magdalene's eyes and recognized how close they were. Given her absolutely inappropriate thoughts and their respective concerns about being discovered in a compromising position, she slowly tugged her hand out of the easy grasp of those graceful fingers. She felt the loss of contact in her 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, the reality of what could have happened hitting her all of a sudden.

Gentle fingers touched her chin, raising her eyes to Magdalene's.

"I guess all the cat talk didn't distract you. Don't be scared, Sam. I'm all right." A brief touch of cool lips was applied to her forehead before Magdalene stepped away once again.

"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."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

Sam stole one last lingering glance at the rigid form standing in the doorway.

“I’m here if you need me.” The cold expression warmed imperceptibly, but Magdalene said nothing, simply turned, and disappeared behind the massive doors.

A second later Willoughby, as if sensing the departure of his mistress even in his sleep, rose, stretched, and trotted after her as quickly as his bulk allowed him.

13

Of Pavement On The Road To Hell & Loyalty

Sheriff Green, a burly man with a misplaced Southern accent amidst all the New Englanders, arrived relatively swiftly, all things considered. Either Magdalene had pulled some strings, or he was simply curious about the drama playing out at Three Dragons Academy, Sam wasn’t certain.

Still, he seemed thorough, respectful, and overall competent. If they had to go through the whole ordeal and involve law enforcement, they certainly could have done much worse.

The afternoon passed in a complete upheaval of people coming and going, inspecting the dormitory, the Mess Hall, and generally disturbing the usually quiet and monotonous passage of summer days at Dragons. Sam had to laugh at having taken the monotony for granted, as nothing had been quiet, or business as usual since Magdalene had set foot on the island, and if she was perfectly honest with herself, since her eyes had met Magdalene’s magical ones in that dim bar in Manhattan.

Orla anxiously flitted from one place to the next, exceedingly getting on everyone's nerves, to the point that even the ever-pleasant Joanne—who had returned from the mainland in something approaching a food coma from all the donuts she'd indulged in—had snarled at her to sit down and stop interfering with whatever the cops were attempting to do.

The three of them sat in silence in the teachers' lounge awaiting further developments when the door opened and Stanton Alden entered the room. He looked somehow older than the last time Sam had seen him a month ago, at Magdalene's presentation. His back stooped a bit, and he seemed very tired. Sam knew he'd announced earlier that year that he was running for Governor of Massachusetts again, although she couldn't fathom why. He had served a term as Governor in his early fifties, made a bid for Senate, lost, and settled into a placid sort of semi-retirement, running all kinds of charities and businesses. He was an exceptionally wealthy man. Perhaps he was bored and restless and thus kept finding things to do. But it was rather obvious that the pace of all those things and the campaign were wearing on him. At almost seventy, despite still being fit and trim, he was no longer a spring chicken.

Still, he did not look good at the moment, and for some unknown reason, Sam held a sliver of affinity for him, despite him having been a completely unsuitable, even neglectful, guardian to her once upon a time. Granted, he could've been much worse, but he also could have been better. What did it say about her perception of men, that she was rejoicing about them not being worse for the second time today? She filed the thought away and turned to Alden as he made his way into the room and shook hands with everyone.

"Professor Threadneedle, I would like to speak with you. Is there a place where we could do that? I'd hate to disturb the ladies." Sam schooled her face to remain impassive, but it was rather hard not to giggle at the obvious disappointment on Joanne and Orla's faces. As much as they loved Sam, when they were bored, they were also very nosy and they were surely burning with desire to know the eldest

trustee's reasons to be on the island and to speak privately to Sam.

She could absolutely relate to her friends' curiosity though, and with great anticipation and no small amount of trepidation, she stood up and led him down the corridor to the classroom she normally taught in. To her surprise, the chairs were overturned on the desks and the room smelled of fresh paint. When did Magdalene have this space renovated?

Sam felt like so many things about the school were changing that she barely managed to keep up. And in times like these, she realized that she had no idea how Magdalene juggled so many balls at once and still succeeded in keeping pace for Dragons to reopen in time for the new school year. The woman was a machine, and Sam felt that she was not giving her enough credit, enough praise, or enough trust. Because ultimately, as much as Sam was conflicted about Magdalene's reforms, she could no longer deny that—quietly and without drawing unnecessary attention—the Headmistress was also going about the business of running the Academy and making it better.

With these thoughts percolating in her mind and distracting her from the business at hand, Sam struggled to pull herself back into the present situation, which needed her to have her wits about her. Alden's visits were sporadic and he'd never sought her out before. Why was he here now?

Alden walked around the classroom, touching some of the paintings, obviously getting his courage up to get to the point he had traveled all the way from Boston to make. Finally, he turned, seeming to gather his thoughts.

"Ah, I guess it's customary to inquire about menial things and make small talk in these situations?" Sam's face must've shown the incredulity to his opening salvo and he shrugged a shoulder before giving her a tightlipped smile that was more grimace than anything else.

“I was in the neighborhood, so to speak. Campaigning. You might’ve heard about my renewed political ambitions.”

Sam nodded, still mystified by the turn of this conversation.

“Found myself in an empty mansion a year ago when my Edward passed away. You’d never think that you’d outlive your family. So when they came to me to see if I was interested in challenging the current empty suit, I said why not? In any case, I’m rambling and this isn’t why I’m here.”

He made another full circle around the classroom before approaching her.

“Are you okay, Samantha?”

He had never called her by her first name. Even as a kid when she’d spent the occasional holiday at his home, he always used the polite address to the young woman and her last name. To have him say it now sounded foreign and unwarranted.

“I heard from Joel that you’ve been attacked several times.” His face showed honest concern, but Sam was perplexed by how misplaced it felt.

“Ah, I’m okay, Mr. Alden. And it seems Headmistress Nox was the intended target. I’m fine, thank you.” She carefully perched on the corner of her desk and sat very still, confused by the whole scene playing out in front of her. He seemed disquieted somehow, but Sam couldn’t really place his emotion and decided to wait him out.

“That’s good. Well, obviously it’s not good that Ms. Nox is being harassed, but is there real danger? To the school? To the faculty?”

She shrugged a shoulder. He obviously needed more reassurance than she had given him so far, but Sam chose to remain silent and continued to observe his unraveling.

Something about his words was rubbing her wrong. He clearly had an agenda, but Sam couldn't figure out what it was.

“I, ah, I was concerned about the whole situation concerning the school and with whatever is happening here with Ms. Nox.”

The damn address. The way he was addressing Magdalene and the glaring lack of the proper title was what Sam's ear had been disturbed by, she suddenly realized. It was strange that Alden was not referring to Magdalene as 'Headmistress'. It was weird. He was acting weird. The whole situation was, well, weird for lack of a better word, and Sam was just a bit too frazzled to be looking into better vocabulary choices.

“I think we may have made a mistake by allowing her free rein at Dragons, don't you think so?”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

And just like that, things became much less strange and confusing for Sam. Alden was here under the guise of concern for his former ward to get dirt on the Headmistress who was bucking the trustees' constraints. What a shitty thing to do, Sam thought. She could, of course, tell him that Magdalene was doing a lousy job, that she was endangering the school's very existence. He was looking at Sam with avid eyes, searching perhaps for those very words, but Sam just stared steadily back at him.

"I think we are not yet fully apprised of all the measures Headmistress Nox is prepared to take here at Three Dragons, Mr. Alden."

"Surely you see though, Samantha, that she is jeopardizing the school, certainly you have suffered because of her..."

Sam raised her hand so quickly, he immediately fell silent, opening and closing his mouth, clearly surprised by her emphatic gesture.

"Except she wasn't the one to put me in danger. Whoever it is that is harassing her and committing these malicious acts against her, whether she ends up the actual victim or not, are the ones putting people in danger. What if it hadn't been me touching the wire in the rain, but Joanne Dorsea? At her age, with her heart, I don't think she could have withstood any kind of electric jolt. I was simply lucky to be wearing rubber boots. It turned out I wasn't really in any kind of danger."

"That's good, that's good." He mumbled, still pacing the room.

"I thought the trustees would show Headmistress Nox their full support, especially

considering what she's being exposed to by doing your bidding."

She hissed her accusation through gritted teeth, and he turned to her sharply, but Sam was not going to be deterred.

"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?"

Sam didn't know where the words were coming from. But as she spoke, the last vestiges of doubt left her mind. She felt just as guilty. She'd been one of the people, like Alden, to sit and accuse Magdalene of a myriad of sins without so much as considering that she was simply doing the job she'd been hired to do.

Yes, they disagreed on some things, but as the fresh coat of paint in her classroom proved, Sam had no idea about the actual good that was being accomplished behind the scenes. All she'd chosen to see were the disagreements and squabbles and petty arguments over things that—if she was completely honest and didn't allow herself to be totally blinded by her loyalty to Orla and to the old times—needed to change anyway. Hadn't she wished for change? So why was she now standing in its way?

Magdalene was trying to right the wrongs and walk the line that had been drawn for her by those with true power and authority. Wasn't it clear by now that she wasn't really out to get Dragons back for throwing her out, for being different all those years ago, but was somehow trying to rescue the school, despite what it had done to her? Sam shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts, setting aside her tumultuous feelings for later. How was it that she always had these massive revelations in the midst of some other crisis?

A chuckle from Alden broke through the haze of her reverie.

“I swear, Tullinger Senior would’ve gotten a tickle, watching you just now. You know he laughed when you socked Joel all those years ago. Told me you had more spunk than all his progeny put together. Maybe he was right.”

He turned away from her again and resumed his pacing. Sam stood rigid—all her muscles locked with the strength of her tightly reined-in fury—refusing to process what had just happened. The revelations kept coming. It was starting to make her head spin. She thought both these men hadn’t had the time of day for her. In fact, she’d been certain they never cared one jot about what happened to her as long as they never heard of her causing any trouble, meaning they never had to intervene or get involved in her life.

“I didn’t mean to ambush you. I just heard that you might have been hurt and came to see how you were. Plus, all this is getting out of hand. The Old Dragonettes are at my every campaign event, clamoring that the school is being taken apart brick by brick...”

Sam’s legendary temper, which had oftentimes made Orla call her the Fourth Dragon, and which she was carefully trying to keep in check throughout this whole conversation finally snapped the reins.

“Ah, say no more, Mr. Alden. My safety and the school’s safety are only a concern when it becomes a problem for you and your political aspirations. I remember this from my childhood. I was good enough for campaign pictures when you were running for Governor, showing how you took care of an orphan, but not good enough to really disturb the state of the pristine carpets of your home.”

Where was the rancor coming from? Sam thought she didn’t really care about any of that, but some of it had probably been fermenting inside her long enough and was

spilling out now.

“That’s not what I meant.” He made a move to get closer to her, but she stopped him with a glare.

“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.”

He started at this. “But you yourself don’t support these efforts, Samantha.”

“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.”

Having said her piece, she turned on her heels and exited the room, leaving him alone and looking a little frailer in the wake of her departure. He really had looked pitiful, she thought, the spineless old coot. Men like him always found women to throw under the bus for the decisions they themselves made.

* * *

The evening found Sam alone in her apartment trying to read, but in reality simply staring at the pages of the book. She had memorized *The Light Princess* by heart a long time ago, and yet she still loved getting lost in the beloved pages. Still, tonight they did not hold her attention. The events of the day spiraled in her mind, causing her to think of all the ways she could’ve perhaps worded her parting shot to Alden differently, without offending him. Except she found it difficult to regret any of her

words when she'd meant every single one of them. Alden had not endeared himself to her this afternoon.

A knock on her door caused her to start and then laugh at how jumpy she'd become. She set the book aside and opened the door to reveal Magdalene and, unsurprisingly, Willoughby. The cat did not wait for her permission to enter and simply padded inside, making himself comfortable on the chair Sam had just vacated.

Magdalene raised an eyebrow, obviously much more polite than the cat, and awaited Sam to beckon her inside.

"You wouldn't believe who visited me today, Sam."

"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."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

Magdalene smirked and nodded.

“Indeed. I was offered some support from the trustees in these trying times.”

To Sam’s ear, sarcasm sounded particularly seductive when spoken in that low, husky tone. Focus, Sam, focus.

“Some?” Asshole. Sam couldn’t help but roll her eyes.

“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 came closer and the coolness of her hand on Sam’s own felt like a balm.

“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.”

“Hm, I like you calling me ‘an upheaval.’” Sam smiled at the attempt at humor, then gasped when she realized that Magdalene was carefully inspecting her injured hand.

“I’m fine, I’m fine.” She tried to pull away, only to realize what she was doing, and relaxed in Magdalene’s gentle hold.

“So you keep telling people, Sam.” Of course Magdalene knew what had transpired between Alden and her. Even if he hadn’t told her himself, Dragons had ears and eyes that seemed to multiply when uncomfortable situations were involved.

“Yes, George overheard you talking to him. Or well, some of your conversation before I caught her and made her stop eavesdropping.”

“Ah...” Lost for words, Sam was also getting entirely too wrapped up in the small circles Magdalene’s fingertips were tracing on her palm.

“Are you really fine though?” Magdalene gave the injured paw a long look and her fingers gentled further.

“I’m getting there.” Sam’s voice was hoarse, the careful exam veering into caress territory, but the concern was so tender, so sweet, her chest constricted painfully and then expanded to make space for this overwhelming feeling of being cared for, protected.

As Sam struggled to take deep breaths for the new sensation wrapping itself around her, Magdalene went on, her face valiantly fighting to remain impassive, save for a sly smile tugging at a corner of her mouth.

“I may or may not have stayed behind after shooin’ George away and finished the eavesdropping job she started?” Magdalene’s eyes were pure mischief. “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?”

Magdalene's face was serious, her expression, as always, cool and collected, but for once her eyes betrayed her, the warm amber shining with appreciation and affection. Maybe Sam was learning to read her, or maybe she had been lowering her guard more for Sam these days. Either way, it felt like a benediction, like a privilege to be here and look into that gentle gaze.

"I guess I'm rather transparent about that infatuation then." Sam tried to make a joke and turned to take a step back, but her hand was being held—while tenderly—in a surprisingly strong grip. And the serious expression demanded seriousness in return.

"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's eye narrowed slightly at Sam's inference that she was a mere tool, but to Sam's relief she let it go and the warmth returned to her eyes.

"I still have questions, mind you."

"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... 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."

"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 gave her an enigmatic look.

"Well, if you volunteer your services..."

"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 breezily and resumed making lazy circles on Sam's hand, periodically venturing to caress her wrist and causing Sam's breath to hitch and her heart to go hazy with longing. But something tugged at the corners of her mind, and she closed her eyes to give herself a second and take a breather from the beautiful and distracting sight in front of her.

"Wait, stop, I can't think when you touch me." The older woman bit her lip, trying to contain a smile, and Sam suddenly jumped up. "This was a setup! You wanted me to go with you."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

Magdalene tried to look innocent, but even she must have known she wasn't quite pulling it off. "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"

"Suspicion? You tricked me! With your caresses and your perfume... And just being here with me... Like this." Sam waved her hand between them.

Dropping the pretense, Magdalene simply sat at the desk and placed her chin on her hand. She made such an alluring picture, Sam's mouth watered.

"Are you saying that I used my feminine wiles to tempt you, Sam?" The voice went down a whole octave, and goosebumps ran down Sam's back.

"Ah, I don't think you need wiles."

"Are you certain?" She had not moved, her chin still resting on that gracefully folded palm, bicolored eyes sparkling with heat, looking straight through Sam, as the voice wrapped itself around her like a silk ribbon.

"What was the question again?" Sam felt intoxicated by the presence of this woman in this place where she had grown up, where she had dreamt about a love like this. Had she conjured Magdalene into existence from her dreams? And love? Sam blinked, and the anguish must've shown on her face Or because Magdalene lowered her palm to the desk and her countenance lost the seductive expression.

"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. Suddenly breathing heavily, Sam felt so tired of people playing their games, with her being the innocent bystander. If she was to be damned, she wanted to at least deserve it.

“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 angry now for being dismissed so easily, Sam caught her elbow, making her stumble, and catching her by pressing her back between her own front and the nearby wall.

The feeling of *deja vu* was overwhelming. 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, time and distance seemed to have disappeared, revelations and assurance granted and accepted, fledgling bridges of trust being built on hope. The air was no longer charged with desperation, but possibilities.

And now both of them were breathing rapidly, their proximity sparkling with electricity, and this spark, Sam thought, had enough voltage to hurt both of them. Their breath mingled, Magdalene’s subtle perfume touching something deep in Sam, making her want and want and want... She felt like all she did these days was want, need, crave. This scent, this body under her hands, under her mouth. They were kissing then, mouths hungry, bruising, leaving no room for anything other than raw desire, scorching them both. Sam’s hand delved into Magdalene’s short locks just as Magdalene’s fingers tugged and raked, the simple elastic holding up Sam’s ponytail no match for the determined Headmistress. Sam whimpered when their tongues touched, Magdalene sucking on hers gently, turning up the heat tenfold just with this one move. Sam’s unrestricted pleasure at the gesture seemed to only ignite Magdalene further, and she tugged on the blond hair at the base of Sam’s head to tip her face up, exposing her neck, and biting with enough enthusiasm that it would

surely leave a mark. Teeth raked at Sam's sensitive skin and an agile tongue followed, soothing the bite but managing only to inflame further.

Not wanting to cease control just yet, Sam's hands abandoned Magdalene's hair and traveled downward, seeking purchase on her hips before moving lower still. She dragged her fingers up the exquisite thighs, raising the skirt up, inch by inch, and exposing a set of stockings, garters and all, that managed to render her completely stupid.

"Please don't tell me you walk around the school like this... I may never be able to function again." Magdalene's chuckle was honestly obscene in how dirty it sounded in the quiet of the apartment, and it went directly between Sam's legs, her clit throbbing painfully, demanding attention. But not now, not now... Now was for these stockings, Sam thought as she lowered herself to her knees. Magdalene moaned at the simple sight of Sam at her feet, and it was Sam's turn to laugh. Two could play this game, and seeing the obvious effect she had on this woman was heady. She hiked the skirt a few inches higher and exposed a barely-there lacy thong that made her mouth go dry. The wet spot on the crimson silk made her brain empty and her body take over. She leaned forward, hungry to taste the effect she had on Magdalene.

The knock on the door just feet away from where they stood made both of them jump and then freeze.

"Sam? Are you home? Is Magdalene with you?" George's muffled voice had the effect of a cold shower. Magdalene's head fell against the wall behind her, her breathing slowing. Sam simply lowered her face onto one of the stocking-clad thighs, and the no-longer-cold hands cradled her there until George stopped knocking and her soft steps could be heard departing the hallway in front of Sam's apartment.

Magdalene carefully tugged on Sam's hand, raising her from her knees, and then proceeded to set her skirt to rights. Sam thought that, while her own attire did not

require many repairs—despite her panties perhaps needing to be changed—her heart would definitely demand some mending from this latest encounter of theirs.

But as if sensing her distress and need for healing, Magdalene placed a gentle kiss on Sam's cheek and then beckoned Willoughby with a snap of her fingers. The tom meowed in compliance, and the Headmistress and her faithful companion disappeared from the room, leaving more than Sam's hair disheveled. Her feelings and her emotions would need significant calming down. If that was even achievable at this point.

14

Of Heavy Burdens & Newfound Boldness

The trip to Chatham, a small town on the mainland where Sheriff Green had his office, usually took about two hours with some wait time at the ferry dock. That day Sam felt like it had been an eternity since they'd left the dorms. The island spread behind them, with the Dragon Cliffs standing guard over it, as if telling Sam that they would be safekeeping the school until she got back to resume the task.

Sam wanted to laugh at her fanciful and foolish thoughts. And yet time and time again, others kept putting her in this position of guardian, and it seemed to be taken by everyone as a fait accompli. It had started in her high school years, when the teachers would ask her to take care of the younger girls, despite her not being a Proctor, simply by virtue of the fact that she never went anywhere for the holidays, knew everyone, and was always present, responsible, reliable.

And it had certainly continued when she'd returned to the school as a teacher, without much choice of her own, both Joanne and especially Orla imposing on her the responsibility of keeping Dragons safe. With Magdalene's arrival and Orla's role diminishing, Sam was not surprised to have been thrust into the spotlight again. She

thought she'd never stepped out of it, to begin with, this time with Joanne pushing and prodding her to take a stand to defend, protect, safeguard.

Last night, with Joanne and Orla back from the mainland and their respective interviews with the Sheriff's department, they had camped out in Sam's apartment, nudging and tugging at her, wanting to know what she would say, what she thought the outcome of the investigation might be, and whether she really believed someone at Dragons was trying to harm the Headmistress.

Orla had scoffed and raged against the very notion, but her fear and her concern for the school, for the girls, for the faculty, were palpable. Sam's heart went out to her. Twenty years was a long time to put your soul into something, only to see it all dismantled, one once carefully laid stone at a time. And when all was said and done, Orla had nothing and no one aside from Dragons. She had sacrificed her whole life at the altar of the school, had spurned serious relationships—despite her numerous flings—forsaken friends and family until none were left.

Last night, Joanne had chosen to sit quietly and watch Sam and Orla go round after round over the same ground, with Sam defending and Orla attacking the new order. When it got late and Orla departed, still angry that Sam wasn't ready to join her in open protest, Joanne chose to stay behind. Sam had almost forgotten she was there, but as Orla made her exit in a huff, she heard a soft chuckle coming from the corner and whirled around in surprise.

“This whole situation has gotten you on edge, little one.” Joanne's dear face was obscured by shadows from the windows, but Sam thought she caught more than just mirth in the expression.

“I guess it's your turn now?” God, she really did not want to have this conversation anymore. Hadn't Orla said everything there was to say already?

“No, I don’t think I get a turn, Sammy.” Pardon? Sam did a double-take, surprised by her often outspoken and always opinionated mentor’s current reticence.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:51 pm

“We’ve been tearing you to pieces for weeks now, almost months. Probably years, my girl. I don’t think either Orla or I considered what this might be doing to you.” She stood carefully—Sam knew her vertigo had been flaring up again these past few days, and her heart went out to her old guardian.

“Your whole life—either by intention or by circumstance—these stone giants and this school have been everything for you. Your home, your family, when you’ve had nothing. And now your loyalties are tested in the worst ways possible. Your home or your heart? Horrible thing to make you choose, little one. I apologize.”

“Jo...”

“Time to distinguish between what’s good for you, and what’s good for Dragons. Orla always half-jokes that you’re the Fourth Dragon, and I know that that has never sat comfortably on your shoulders. I think it’s time you either fully embrace it, or shake off that moniker.”

When Sam had called after her, she hadn’t stopped. Instead, she’d simply made her way to the door and quietly closed it behind herself, leaving the room empty of everything but anguish.

* * *

Watching the waves foam up against the side of the ferryboat, Sam was lost in the realization that Joanne had figured her out, had read whatever had been on her face for close to two months now and had come to the right conclusions. She was being asked to choose between loyalty to her home and fealty to the new desire growing in

her heart. She could not yet call it love—it was too soon and too raw—this thing that was blossoming between Magdalene and her. But her heart was no longer unencumbered, and the conflict was indeed tearing at her. Knowing that at least one of her friends understood and stopped pushing her to make an impossible choice, felt like a reprieve, but was not enough.

Sam knew she had to stop equating her own happiness with that of the school, but at the same time, she cared way too much about Lily and the other scholarship girls, and about the very stones and brick and mortar that made up the foundation of who she was. And if Magdalene went too far in executing the trustees' orders? Where would that leave Sam? She did not want to contemplate the fallout, because she would lose both her home and her heart in a single swoop of the Headmistress' pen.

Still, her heart had been steadfast in its desire to stand up and protect Magdalene as well. From everything she'd seen and was shown by the Headmistress, she was overwhelmingly good at her job. And the previous day, standing up to Alden and kneeling down in front of Magdalene, Sam had made the decision that it was time to let go. Just this once. If Lily and Amanda and the rest of the girls felt like they could trust and rest easy in Magdalene's proverbial hands, why should Sam be apprehensive about doing the same in the actual ones?

Because, Sam thought, she desperately wanted Magdalene to save Dragons and by extension save her as well, from loneliness, from lovelessness. And wasn't that a kick in the teeth after fancying herself the savior and the protector?

They arrived at the Sheriff's department around midday and with six girls, Sam, and Magdalene needing to make their statements, it took them the remainder of the afternoon to get through everyone. Since they'd known the last ferry would be gone by the time they were through, they had promised Lily and the rest a movie, shopping, and ice cream the next day as a reward for their troubles with the cops, and retreated to the small bed-and-breakfast where they'd booked four rooms in advance.

Sam knew all this because George had made a huge production about who'd be rooming with whom, making jokes and fooling around with the girls about their sleeping arrangements. Of course, both Sam and Magdalene were to have separate accommodations.

Later, they chose a quiet diner on Main Street for their dinner, the cozy Americana of red vinyl booths, and the scents of apple pie hitting just the right notes after the day they'd had. The meal was a quiet affair, the girls exhausted after their interviews and the excitement of being on the mainland. Tomorrow would be a long day of even more elation, and they were all soaking in the calm before the impending retail storm.

Raising her eyes from her mostly uneaten fries and untouched burger, Sam ran straight into a thoughtful gaze from Magdalene, whose fork was mindlessly picking at a Cesar salad that was more spread across the plate than eaten. With the voices of the girls around them fading into the background, they watched each other steadily, and the room seemed to obtain a kind of pulse, a vibration that originated from Magdalene's chest and found a home in Sam's, its steady beat akin to a litany in Sam's ears.

Lily coughed noisily next to her, jostling Sam from her daydream. She blinked once, then twice, trying to understand where she was and what was happening around her. Seconds ago Magdalene had been the be-all and end-all, and Sam's mind was stubbornly refusing to return from that unfolding fantasy. With one last, brief glance at Magdalene, she saw those sharp cheekbones tinged with a hint of pink, and it only inflamed Sam more, that small yet telling reaction in the other woman. All they had to do was survive this hour... And then what?

Sam took a long gulp from her ice water and almost choked on it, realizing that she had no answer to this question. Two nights ago Magdalene had walked out on her in the middle of one of the hottest kisses of Sam's life. Screw it, the absolute hottest. Not even their kisses in Manhattan compared. Somehow the proximity and the connection

they'd been building in the past two months, as adversarial as it had been, had made the longing all the sweeter. Sam had wanted Magdalene in New York, but Sam craved her now, her hunger overflowing the confines of the small rustic diner. She was certain it radiated from her in waves, and Magdalene's pink cheekbones told her as much.

Lily coughed again, finally managing to drag her attention from her conundrum, only to nod towards the oblivious others and smirk victoriously once Sam turned her way. Her whisper was conspiratorial.

"Never ever play poker, teach, ever. Trust me on this one." Sam wanted to bristle, but with this particular kid, so insightful and intuitive, denial was only going to draw more of Lily's attention to whatever she thought she saw. Misdirection was better. She took a quick look around to make sure nobody paid them any attention before lowering her own voice.

"Do not think that you 'volunteering' to stay with Amanda somehow escaped my attention, Lils. Should I be knocking on your door every other hour or so, just to make sure you're alright and haven't expired from all the teenage angst?"

Lily paled and hastily swallowed the chunk of burger she had the misfortune of chewing as Sam spoke. She choked on it, and now the attention of the whole table was indeed on them. At Magdalene's raised eyebrow, Sam thumped Lily on the back gently and winked.

"Nothing the matter here, right Lils, just us talking about how all the weirdness of sleeping in a new place might turn out."

Lily was fully crimson by the time she finally managed to draw a full breath, and she sheepishly refused to look at either Sam, or Magdalene, or Amanda for that matter, until their dinner was over.

Sooner than Sam expected, the girls filtered out, one by one or in pairs, wishing them a good night, heading back to the B&B, leaving her and Magdalene alone with only dirty dishes between them. Sam chose not to consider this some kind of metaphor for all the unresolved issues still lingering where they were concerned. Secrets and anguish littered their nascent relationship, and Sam involuntarily made a gesture of sweeping the few crumbs onto her still half-full plate, effectively tidying the little space on the table in front of her. Like this inconsequential clean-up would magically give resolution to the minefield between them.

As if reading her mind, Magdalene's lips twitched, and then it felt like she gave up resisting and the smile blossomed fully, her whole face transforming from cool repose to brilliant contentedness.

"Sam... Sam... Sam... What am I going to do with you?" The voice, dripping with amusement like thick honey, still managed to transcend the innuendo and land somewhere too sensual for a provincial diner at closing time. Sam feared the red vinyl benches they sat on might spontaneously combust from the sheer suggestiveness in that one question. And the way Magdalene had said her name... No amount of ice water in the world would cool her off.

"I mean, this could be construed as a trick question?" She tried for cheeky and was rewarded with such a smoldering expression in those now almost fully amber eyes, that she crossed her legs tighter, uselessly seeking relief.

But then, just as suddenly as the eyes had turned hot, Magdalene lowered them and bit her lip, looking away, indecision evident in her gesture.

"Sam, I'm not saying no. I'm asking you to consider that, while some circumstances have changed, the things that divide us are still just as present here as they were on Dragons..." She didn't finish her sentence, but Sam felt the gravity of the moment in her bones. Never before had she been at a crossroads with so much riding on her

decision. Looking at the now distant and withdrawn profile, the sharp line of the jaw, the chiseled cheekbones, the straight, graceful line of the nose, its delicate wings flaring with barely restrained emotion, Sam thought perhaps there was no decision to be made at all. Like she had been taking little steps towards this very moment her entire life, and now that it had arrived, she realized that there was no alternative on the table.

Hadn't she felt it from the very beginning, from the very first time she'd inhaled the subtle scent of wild jasmine warmed by flawless skin, that she had known this woman forever, that she held her in her bones, that she carried this woman as a dream, in her every night, in her every waking hour.

So instead of answering, Sam simply extended her hand, palm up on the table she'd just cleaned herself. Normally a gesture of supplication, it was anything but, and Magdalene's breath catching told her as much. Sam wasn't begging anymore. She was making a decision. She was choosing and letting Magdalene either follow her lead or fold. For a second it all felt suspended, and Sam was afraid to breathe. Yet the moment stretched for too long, and perhaps it was time to do more than breathe.

Sam stood up, disturbing the table and startling them both, and what was reflected in her eyes seemed to surprise Magdalene. But as seconds ticked by, Sam felt her own decision crystalizing, and when she finally extended her hand again, Magdalene took it without hesitation, her cool fingers trembling slightly in Sam's grip before she visibly willed them to steady. When Magdalene spoke her voice was resolute.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

“Well then, I guess this means you’ve taken my advice and thought things through?”

“I did. Now say yes.”

Magdalene gripped Sam’s hand tighter and pulled her towards the diner door.

“I just did.”

* * *

If asked later, Sam would be hard-pressed to say how they had made it to the bed-and-breakfast. She had no memory of the ten-minute walk down Chatham’s Main Street, barely any of quickly checking in on the girls who were all playing some board game in one of the rooms, and making their way down the long corridor to the far section of the old Victorian where Sam’s room was located.

What she remembered with certainty from those minutes was the hand steadily warming in hers. A hand that held on firmly after that initial tremble. A hand that tore at her scrunchy the second the door closed behind them, the elastic falling prey to a resolute Magdalene Nox. In fact, nothing really was a match for the Headmistress, not Sam’s jacket or her jeans, no matter how skinny they were and hence quite an undertaking to try and remove swiftly. But they also surrendered to Magdalene’s adroitness in seconds and then, sweet lord in heaven, she was kneeling in front of Sam looking up at her with heated eyes, hunger raw and evident in her gaze.

All Sam could do was hold on to the wall behind her, as Magdalene’s mouth descended with lethal precision. No teasing, no games. The deft, skilled tongue

swiped once, twice at her clit before strong hands pushed her legs further apart and Madalene actually growled as Sam tried to hold back, to hold on, squirming under the attention she was unaccustomed to. But her lover was relentless and Sam grew wetter just from taking in the sight in front of her.

And then she lost the presence of mind to even look, all thought abandoned to the sheer sensation as fingers joined the tongue and she was taken apart and put back together in what felt like seconds.

Insistent sucking on her clit and hard, fast thrusts of two fingers that unerringly found her very center time and again, brought an orgasm that seemed to come in waves, scaring her with its intensity, causing her to scream Magdalene's name over and over. And if it hadn't been for her lover's presence of mind and quick reflexes to get up swiftly and place her free hand over Sam's mouth, she was sure she'd have made the entire bed-and-breakfast aware of how expertly she was being fucked.

As she shook in Magdalene's arms, listening to quiet murmurs of nonsensical words of encouragement in her ear, Sam wasn't sure she cared all that much if anyone heard her. This was glorious. This was heaven. One hand covered her mouth and the other still thrust into her gently, drawing out every single drop of pleasure from her, and Sam allowed herself to simply stop. Stop thinking, stop hoping, stop defending and fighting and arguing and hanging on to things that never quite turned out the way she wanted them to.

She was here now, in these arms that felt like home, with this woman who was perfection, and it was time to let go. She breathed in the scent that was becoming essential to her happiness, to her very wellbeing, and allowed herself to be taken entirely.

* * *

Some time later, she surfaced with Magdalene still holding her upright, caressing her face now, playing with the strands of her hair that probably looked like a bird's nest with all the tugging and playing Magdalene always seemed to unleash on it when they were together like this. Sam grinned.

“What’s so funny?” Magdalene allowed herself to draw back just enough to glance at Sam’s face, which probably looked like a total fool’s.

“You have a thing for hair?” Sam finally straightened entirely and shucked the jeans still clinging to her ankles, impeded by her Chucks. God, they hadn’t even taken the time to get undressed properly. It made her giddy, it made her almost breathless with desire.

Magdalene smiled slyly and ran her hand through Sam’s blond tresses, further disheveling them.

“I never did, but I can’t help it with you.” She gave Sam a suddenly serious look, before tsking, “I can’t seem to help myself with a lot of things when it comes to you.”

Gently, as if to not interrupt the revelation, Sam began unbuttoning Magdalene’s blouse as she continued.

“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 and then 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.” Sam’s protest was short-lived as Magdalene leaned in again and kissed her hard on the mouth, before continuing as if she hadn’t just completely taken Sam’s breath and the rest of her reason away with that lingering bite on her lower lip that should’ve been painful, but instead was simply annihilating.

“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 felt tears sting the back of her eyes. The sound of the laughter was so beautiful, so sincere, so free.

Sam recovered enough from her kiss-induced and giggle-charmed stupor to continue to unfasten the many tiny buttons on Magdalene’s blouse, grumbling in exasperation, until Magdalene simply grasped the two parts of fabric and tugged, rending them.

“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.”

Sam ran her hands up and down the smooth, trembling skin of the pale abdomen, tracing muscle before lowering her head and kissing where her hands had been, slowly inching up to where a beautiful, delicate, lacy bra did nothing to obscure the breasts that featured heavily and recurrently in Sam’s dreams.

And suddenly Sam wanted to be bold and courageous and do and say all the things she had craved to do and say to this woman, who was so bold and so courageous herself. So she swallowed hard and tried to rise to the standard that her lover had set for them both. She exhaled a heated breath over the soft skin covered in lace and saw the nipple pebble without a single touch.

“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...”

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 nipples now straining towards her mouth, still encased in ivory.

“Please...” The word, murmured in that quiet, desperate intonation, with Magdalene’s voice falling to its lowest register, tore at Sam and she took the nipple closest to her in her mouth, sucking at it, teasing it against the now wet lace, the scrape of which only seemed to heighten Magdalene’s response.

Sam’s mind was thrown back to the fateful night when she’d held a live wire in her hand. Live wire indeed, Magdalene moved with desperation against her mouth, perfectly manicured nails raking Sam’s back, surely leaving marks that Sam knew she’d cherish for as long as they lasted. Switching breasts, she finally relented and tore at the bra, careless with the delicate lace that she’d admired just moments ago. Now it impeded her access to that hot, smooth skin, and Sam’s hunger could no longer be restrained.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

When she took the naked nipple in her mouth 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 she felt her lover's knees give out, she simply pulled her further into the room and toppled her onto the bed before following herself, never once giving up her prize.

Still, this was not how Sam wanted this encounter to go. She'd had months to imagine it, to fantasize about it, and she had a plan, though she suspected some of it would require a round two or even three, since Magdalene was as taut as a string under her, writhing and moaning with Sam's every lick at her breasts.

But Sam wanted more, wanted everything, and as she moved downward, periodically kissing and nipping at the hip bones or the line between hip and pelvis, she could feel Magdalene holding her breath, no longer moving. As she glanced up, their eyes met and the connection, the sheer raw feeling, and emotion in one look robbed Sam of breath. She lowered her head and tasted then, totally, fully, and she felt more than heard the sigh of surrender that Magdalene let out when Sam's mouth descended.

15

Of Freckles, Love & Truths

Ahand was running up and down her back in rather circuitous patterns that Sam—in her post-orgasmic haze—couldn't quite decipher. She drifted placidly, between dreams of long fingers and the reality of having those very fingers on her skin.

When a quiet whisper became more pronounced, she raised her head from the pillow

to find her lover looking intently at her, laying on her side, head on her left hand, the right continuing its exploration of Sam's back and shoulders. The beautiful face was adorably scrunched up in concentration.

“Wha...”

“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 very confused Sam that she wasn't really upset about whatever it was she was so intent on counting. Sam's bewilderment must've still shown on her face because Magdalene leaned in and kissed her on the nose before settling back on her side.

“I was counting your freckles.”

And just like that, whatever inches of her heart Sam had still been holding back from sliding thoroughly and completely in love with this woman were immediately surrendered. Many, many years later, at the end of her time, Sam realized she would be blessed to be able to say exactly when, to the second, she'd fallen in love, and the words and the extraordinarily sweet gesture that had caused it.

She knew she had been walking the unsteady path towards love for months now, perhaps ever since their night in Manhattan—because she was just that much of a romantic stereotype to begin to slide into deep feelings after just one night of amazing sex. But what had transpired between them ever since Magdalene had walked into the Mess Hall of Dragons two months ago, all those events, the late-night conversations, the serendipitous meetings on Amber Dragon, the morning coffees together, they'd all lead to this exact moment. The moment when Magdalene looked relaxed and happy, and so achingly gorgeous that Sam's chest simply expanded to absorb all this beauty and finally gave up on trying to hold back the tide of feelings.

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. After a while Sam turned on her back and caught the wandering hand, kissing and nipping at each fingertip, making Magdalene throw her head back and giggle like a schoolgirl. The faint lines around her eyes and mouth seemed to disappear as she turned back time with the genuine expression of happiness. She looked youthful, carefree, joyful, and unencumbered by the cares of the world that would intrude soon enough. The wall clock showed 4 AM, and their time together was slowly dwindling.

Still holding the warm fingertips that smelled faintly like her own essence, Sam tucked Magdalene's hand between her breasts and turned on her side. They lay like that for a few moments, facing each other, holding hands in the middle of a totally wrecked bed, with pillows strewn god-knows-where and the fitted sheet torn from its confines.

With joy gradually ebbing from her face, and her expressive eyes giving her away once again, Magdalene cleared her throat.

"Must you?" Sam couldn't help but interrupt whatever unhappy utterance was on its way.

"I must, Sam. I must." But she stayed silent and instead just cuddled closer, right into Sam's ready embrace, putting her head on Sam's shoulder and squeezing her tight. Whatever was about to be said, would be a doozie, and Sam knew it. But what followed from Magdalene, still came as an utter surprise.

"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."

Well, Sam had pretty much called that the revelation would be explosive since Magdalene had been gearing up to something big, but it still took her aback, no

matter how much she'd tried to prepare herself just seconds before. It made her think that she had been wrong, and turns out Dragons had had another gay student and they'd found ways to rid themselves of her, after all. Before Sam's time, but still. And it made her think that staying in her stifling, uncomfortable, yet safe closet was the right thing to do if this is what happened when the truth came out. Still, she remained silent and just held her lover tighter, the tears evident in her voice tearing at Sam's heart.

"Of all people, it was Alden who caught me. How unlucky do you have to be, to not only be caught kissing your first girlfriend for the very first time, but to get caught by a trustee who only visits the school maybe once a year?"

Magdalene burrowed deeper into Sam's arms, and her voice steadied a bit.

"A week after the incident, they dismissed me. I was sixteen and shipped from one boarding school to the next, over and over and over again, Sam. And yet, it was at Dragons where I had my epiphany about who I really was, even if it took me a while to accept it. So you see, the school meant the world to me. I felt at home, I felt like I was given a chance, a chance of a lifetime for me, to fit in, to belong. My mother was mostly absent from my life by then. And this school? It was such a strange conundrum. It was everything good and decent and fun and interesting and yet backward to the point of absurdity. Thirty years ago they could still pass being illegitimate as unacceptable. Considering how religious Dragons was, and how fanatical Reverend Sanderson was in his preaching, someone with the circumstances of my birth had no place there. So they chose to run with that instead of with the fact that they had caught two students in a liplock."

Magdalene absently trailed gentle fingertips on Sam's skin, lost in her memories.

"Deep down, or maybe not even that deep, what they still did not tolerate was for anyone to be gay. Plus, if they'd have documented the real reason for my dismissal in

my files, my chances of getting into another prestigious academy would've been fairly nonexistent. Back then, most of them were religious and rather intent on maintaining appearances. In the end, I was referred to a school that was struggling financially and couldn't afford to be as selective about their students as Dragons chose to be. And my mother had tons of money to throw at them. So they decided to overlook my so-called pedigree."

She sighed, and Sam could feel her skin growing colder despite the closeness of their embrace.

"I always assumed Alden didn't want a scandal on his hands. Hilda, the girl I kissed, was from a very influential family. My mother wouldn't have cared one way or the other, but Hilda's parents would have been certain to cause a ruckus. It would have been like disturbing a veritable wasps' nest, pun intended. Dragons always had this highly conservative reputation—that it was a school exclusively for good Protestant girls. Prudish, repressed parents liked to send their girls there and believed they were praying three times a day and learned psalms or whatnot."

Sam could feel the anger in Magdalene's voice, like a gust of wind, building towards a storm. But then derision took over, and Magdalene seemed to rein in her stronger emotions.

"I confess I wasn't a very good student when it came to religious studies. And I wasn't the only one. Goddess knows, again pun intended, even thirty years ago Dragons rebelled against those structures and strictures. It was quietly moving away from all that. Reverend Sanderson was holding on to the vestiges of that order, but the students were making their opposition known more and more. Maybe that's why I felt like I belonged at Dragons."

The voice warmed, and Sam could feel Magdalene smiling against her chest.

“I was born among the glitz of the Boston elite, an ‘unfortunate accident’ or whatever my mother called it. From the age of five, she shipped me off to various schools—out of sight and out of mind—as she went on with her socialite life. I think the only times she would remember I existed was when she was forced to look for a new school for me since I inevitably caused some kind of chaos no matter where I went. I was restless, abrasive. So by sixteen, I’d seen it all.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

There was a mischievous note in the warm, low voice and it was Sam's turn to smile at the troublesome child Magdalene had been., But she felt the smile was not entirely warranted, because that child had also been troubled and alone.

“So when I stepped foot on the island and saw the school? Dragons might as well have been another world. Confident, cultured, beautifully-attired girls, walking hand in hand from one dorm to another. And I was not a street urchin, despite largely raising myself. But it felt different, it felt like a palace where I could be myself. I fell in love from the very first whiff of that jasmine by the Amber Cliff. And that view? It felt like my biggest dream came true. The following six months were the happiest of my life. I loved everything about Dragons. I also hated a lot about it, hence the rebelling or the ‘troublemaking’, as Joanne liked to call it.”

Sam thought back on the conversations she'd had with both Orla and Joanne, how both of them were convinced Magdalene hated Dragons for having cast her aside. She didn't blame them much for their anger and their suspicion of Magdalene. After all, it turned out she'd had every reason to hate Dragons and to come back with a vengeance, to pay everyone back for throwing out the gay kid.

The fact that Magdalene had dreamed about Dragons all her life, as a lonely girl from an unloving family, and had loved her time there—a time that clearly set her on an ambitious quest to forge her life in such a way that she'd have a chance to return one day—was likely never to be understood by Orla. Sam had hopes that at least Joanne would come around to see it that way. After all, very few people were probably allowed the privilege to get to know the real Magdalene Nox. This Magdalene Nox—the warm, generous, introspective one. The gentle one who counted freckles on her lover's shoulders, and the protective and still angry one who thought that

shunning gay kids was abominable.

Sam swallowed her tears. How many of her preconceived thoughts and opinions were due to the fact that the woman in her arms was a complete enigma? How many people passed on her, were afraid of her, misunderstood, and repudiated her because she was so closed-off? And how many missed out on being shown this completely captivating soul? Sam felt privileged and sad, and just heartbroken all of a sudden.

“Are you crying for the scrawny rebellious ginger kid whom nobody wanted, Sam? You have such a tender heart, darling.” Magdalene rose on her elbows and leaned in to kiss away the tears that Sam wasn’t even aware had fallen.

“No, I... ah, I’m just really grateful to know you. You know, really know you.”

As if wiped off with an eraser, Magdalene’s happiness was gone from her face, leaving naked misery in its wake.

“Ah, the everlasting conversation about Magdalene Nox and her closed-off heart and mind.” Her tone bitter, Magdalene made to get out of Sam’s arms and out of bed, but Sam’s voice stopped her.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“You know that’s what Timothy threw in my face when I caught him with his assistant, in our own bedroom?” Sam shook her head, appalled. “Oh yes, his reason for infidelity after years of marriage was that I was such a closed book, and that all I ever did was ruthlessly move towards my holy grail of a goal - return to Dragons. That he could never see the ‘real’ me. That I was hard to know and thus hard to love.”

Lost for words, shocked, upset, and revolted at Timothy’s behavior, which was borderline abusive—to gaslight his wife in order to shift the blame for his

infidelity—Sam fought hard to keep her temper in check. Wow, a prince of a man.

Sam's voice shook as she murmured, "I'm so sorry, Magdalene."

"He wasn't entirely wrong. I am not easy to know or like, for that matter. And if you've already figured out the former, wait 'till you get to the latter."

Sam thought Magdalene would try to bolt out of the bed. Her voice was high-strung, and she was quivering in the embrace, but instead, Magdalene settled closer, burrowing in again, as if suddenly afraid to be let go of. Swallowing her rage, understanding that that wasn't something Magdalene needed to deal with in addition to her own anguish, Sam held her, running her fingers through the red locks, occasionally tugging to untangle the mess she herself had made by having her hands in Magdalene's hair for hours on end, unable to get her fill.

"That's nice." The purr that came from Magdalene was meant to be seductive, and it did indeed send thoroughly interested tingles all over. But Sam wasn't yet ready to delve back into sex.

"What's not nice is being a gaslighter. He managed to reason away his own failings by placing the blame on your shoulders."

"You sound so sure, so certain that he's the one to blame."

"Did you cheat? Was it you he walked in on in your bed with another woman?" She felt Magdalene shake her head against her sternum.

"Then everything else is filler. Everything else is superfluous."

"My smart Sam." Magdalene yawned sweetly, and her sleepy smile seemed to light up the room.

The ‘aha’ moments just kept coming. In this small, cozy bed-and-breakfast, with the nearby ocean lulling the little town to sleep, Sam kept finding more and more of herself to give away, until she knew she had nothing else to hold back. Magdalene, with her beautiful face and even more beautiful mind, with the depth of her words a glimpse into the depth of her soul, had taken it all from her. Sam could think about the consequences of falling so deeply in love later, when the words ‘my Sam’ did not leave her breathless and warm and fulfilled and completely fearless in the light of everything that was to come.

Because for the very first time in her life—perhaps without even realizing how much it meant to her—somebody had claimed her.

“Yours. If you want me to be. I guess, even if you don’t. Some things aren’t exactly under our control. You, sharing yourself, being an open book. Me, falling for you.”

Magdalene raised her head from Sam’s chest then, her eyes tumultuous. But whatever was coming next, Sam didn’t want the reality of their situation to intrude just yet. So she placed her fingers on those slightly swollen lips, effectively stopping whatever Magdalene was about to say.

“Me falling for you ultimately means nothing other than just that. Or, I guess it doesn’t have to mean anything more. You’re not responsible for my feelings. There’s no fault or guilt—or hell—responsibility in any of this. My feelings are mine alone.”

She was rambling and by the sudden stretching of lips under her fingertips, she knew Magdalene was smiling, finding it endearing. Why did Sam think that Magdalene considering her to be a babbling fool was a sweet thing?

“Sam, responsibility, guilt, or fault aside, your feelings for me are not unrequited. Not at all.”

“Huh?” Something lit up inside her, something warm and fragile and so precious, Sam wanted to curl into a ball and give her life defending it. Was Magdalene really saying that she had feelings for her too?

“But...” Ah, here it came then. And Sam could guess pretty well what was to follow, since Magdalene had been honest and straightforward with her from the very day she’d first set foot on the island.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

“But you can’t be with me, or choose me, because you have a job to do, and said job precludes you from entering into a sexual relationship with one of your subordinates.”

Magdalene started, then looked absolutely adorably discombobulated before dissolving in a fit of giggles. It was Sam’s turn to stop and simply stare, completely charmed by the cutest sound of Magdalene’s easy, unrestrained laughter.

“Sam... God, every time I think I have you figured out, you surprise me, you have this amazing quality of shifting, of never staying the same and always being a delightful revelation. That legalese treatise you just sprung on me is the perfect example.”

She cupped Sam’s cheek, kissing her sweetly on the mouth.

“Yes, I told you just now and many times before, I have a job to do, something I’ve been aspiring towards my whole life. Something that only solidified when I entered this school as an impressionable sixteen-year-old and found a home and a community. Dragons is hurting right now and needs to be saved more so than ever. Believe me, after sitting through meeting upon meeting of financial revisions, budgetary considerations, and just plain cultural assessments for the school conducted by the Board, the overwhelming consensus among its nine members is that the school will not survive the upcoming year. That the endowment will fold and the Academy will need to be closed. The debts are overwhelming, which only allows them to justify their frustrations with the cultural shift at the school over the last twenty years and serves to displease those conservative, puritanical idiots even more.”

She took a few deep breaths, but her color was up and she was obviously agitated beyond what a little breathing exercise could fix.

“I have to try. I have to do my absolute best and fix this situation. Because for those six months I lived at Dragons, I found solace and refuge and a safe haven. And the two hundred girls we house and feed and educate need that too. Girls like Lily and Amanda and all the rest. The world is a pretty harsh place, and if Dragons can protect them for at least their school years, prepare them for what’s out there and give them a sense of belonging, then we’ll have managed to make their lives better, easier. Life will beat them up sooner or later, but for now, they are safe and sound.”

It was Sam’s turn to grin. This woman, flushed and enthusiastic and so damn idealistic, was so unlike the one that had walked into the Mess Hall and fired everyone. And yet, both were real. Sam knew that to achieve her ambition, Magdalene would be ruthless, because Sam could see clearly now—the end result would be worth it. It had occurred to her that Magdalene might apply that ruthlessness to Sam as well, but despite the fact that the outcome would offset some of the pain, it still hurt like hell.

“However, I can’t do any of that if I’m not Headmistress of Three Dragons. My reforms are bound to be as unpopular with the Board of Trustees as they will be with the faculty and student body. To right this ship, to save Dragons, I will render decisions that will make me pretty much despised by one and all. The trustees will look for any excuse to fire me, and the school body will do everything to help them out. Their reasons will be directly opposite, but their goal will be the same. And so I have to be above any and all reproach. At least until I manage to achieve what I hope to achieve. Or until my one-year contract is up.”

Sam gulped noisily, and Magdalene held her, willowy arms tightening around Sam’s neck.

“So you’re giving me up, is that what you’re saying?” Sam couldn’t hold back a small sob.

“I don’t think you realize the depth and intensity of what I feel for you, Sam. I don’t want to give it a name, because I cannot yet give myself to you fully. And so I won’t say those words, but trust me. Nothing is easy for me in this situation.”

She took a deep breath, her ribcage expanding under Sam’s hands, and Sam felt like she was holding a bird, one that would fly away if she herself so much as exhaled.

“I can’t believe I’m even in this situation, to begin with, Sam. I’ve had very few and very discreet liaisons with women before my marriage and after my divorce, but things just didn’t feel right, as I was constantly dissembling and hiding my own feelings from everyone, including from myself. I had resigned myself to never seeing the woman from the hotel again. It was the night that the last of my shackles fell and I allowed myself to admit that I had repressed my sexuality my whole life and that it was time to be free. Except I also knew I was stepping into a very conservative institution, my dream job, that would not allow me to be quite as free in my newly affirmed bisexuality. And so I let that night go, or so I thought. Because when I set foot inside that Mess Hall, there you were, in your flannel shirt and your beat-up Converse, with your outrage and anger and that holier-than-thou attitude that should not have been sexy or appealing, and yet, I could not stay away from you...”

Magdalene smiled up at her shyly. “And seeing you be so blinded by loyalty and pushed so hard by pretty much everyone at school to oppose me. God, Sam, how could I have trusted you? Yet I couldn’t resist you. Days, nights, I tried my damndest. This is my dream, has been since I was sixteen, and I was putting it all on the line for a stubborn, blonde math teacher with a shy smile and sexy bedroom eyes, eyes that looked at me with so much animosity and with so much lust.”

Sam ducked her chin, trying to hide her guilty expression only to be hugged closer.

“I didn’t trust you at all, Sam. Despite the lust, despite the attraction you clearly felt for me, I couldn’t allow myself to confide in you. Until two days ago when I heard you stand up for me. You could have destroyed me with a carefully placed word. Alden was eager for it. But you didn’t. You protected me and... You trusted me, in turn, to protect what you hold dear. I know that it is time for me to trust you.”

She looked so torn, so distraught, that Sam suddenly felt very selfish. Here was this woman who carried the weight of the world on her shoulders, scarred by fate, by betrayal, by the expectation that she will fail. And if by chance she wouldn’t, they’d endeavor to take her down anyway for daring, for succeeding, for taking a stand. And here was Sam, trying to add to her burden. That wouldn’t do.

“I’m sorry.” At Magdalene’s raised eyebrow, Sam smiled and traced the perfectly groomed arch with her fingertip. “You’re so beautiful. Sometimes I lose my train of thought, my breath, and my sanity just looking at you.” The slight blush on Magdalene’s cheekbones only made Sam’s heart expand wider.

“I won’t stand in your way. Don’t say anything. Just listen to me. You’re right. You have a job to do, and the number of people who depend on your success is as high as the number of those who crave your failure. And you’re right that I trust you with the school. So among all the noise and all the demands on you, don’t let me be one of those people. Instead, let me be the one person in your life who wants nothing but to see you triumph. Let me be the one who does not put any additional pressure on you.”

A tear escaped eyes that were almost entirely amber with a very thin circle of blue, barely visible. Sam wiped the tear away, watching with astonishment as Magdalene struggled and finally succeeded in keeping all the others at bay. Even now, unclothed and uncovered, body and soul naked and exposed, she was trying to shield Sam from her emotions, from more responsibility and more guilt. Sam felt benediction and absolution on her fingertips as she held that single tear.

“Will you let me be the person who is simply here for you and who just waits for you?”

The dam broke then, Magdalene’s tears flowing freely. Sam didn’t know if it was the heightened emotions, the exhaustion from having all the expectations weigh heavy on her, or Sam’s absolute support—the complete trust or the complete understanding that she believed she now had of Magdalene—that tipped her lover over the edge, so she just held the sobbing body in her arms, murmuring tender things and rubbing circles on her back. She would hold her and wait for her for a year or for as long as the universe and Dragons needed her to wait.

16

Of Evasiveness & Tartness Of Memories

Sam was sure that the week before the students were to arrive would drag. She was busy with last-minute preparations, and with her hands full with Lily and the rest of the girls who had spent the summer at Dragons, some things had clearly been lost on her.

Chief among them was the sudden flurry of activity at the abandoned astronomy tower on top of Viridescent Dragon Cliff. Since the school sprawled and occupied over half the island—with various buildings and structures, quite a number of them abandoned—Sam was surprised to see the hustle and bustle over at the standalone cliff. It was the one closest to town, hence Sam rarely passed by it or spent any time on it, the long-existing preconceived notions of strict separation between school and town firmly in place.

When Sam finally cottoned on to the occurring changes and asked about the hubbub over on Viridescent, Magdalene kept being evasive.

“I’m unsure what you mean,” would be Magdalene’s usual coy retort, and it only spurred Sam’s curiosity, but then the Headmistress would do something like lick her lips and wink at her, and right on cue Sam would forget entirely what they’d been talking about.

That seemed to be the pattern these last few days. Every time Sam had a question, be it about scholarships, or the religious studies curriculum, or the construction that appeared to be going on everywhere at once, Magdalene would do something, or murmur something that would be so sensual, so sexy, it would take Sam’s breath away and focus her attention on other matters. Such as Magdalene’s breasts, encased in these white button-up blouses, that weren’t really transparent, but sheer enough to hint at a lacy bra underneath. Sam’s thoughts would immediately turn to how she had sucked on Magdalene’s nipple through another lacy bra, doubling the friction of the material with her teeth, and what it had done to the owner of said nipples, and then she’d honestly no longer remember nor care about whatever question she’d had in mind.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

But Magdalene's cunning, if sexy, evasiveness didn't totally deter Sam from making certain assumptions and reaching certain conclusions. The Headmistress was up to something, and that something was major.

Sam understood that Magdalene walked a very fine line between her own principles, the true needs of Dragons and its students, and the very strict list of demands the trustees had set out for her in her contract. And yet, after everything Magdalene had shared with her—from her own heartbreaking story to her deep and thorough understanding of what was needed to lift up Dragons—Sam was anxiously waiting for whatever Magdalene would announce at the opening ceremony in the presence of the entire student body, parents and trustees.

If the latter would even grace the school with their presence. They certainly hadn't attended the opening ceremony in years. Sam had a feeling, though, that after the racket the Old Dragonettes, the parents, and student groups had been raising—including the protests at Alden's campaign events—the trustees might just show up for this one. Whether it was to rejoice at their own triumph of gutting the school, or to remove the Headmistress that dared to go against the grain, remained to be seen.

Other things that occupied Sam's mind were the attacks on Magdalene, which seemed to have stopped after they'd returned from the mainland. Magdalene, of course, refused to heed any caution and still prowled around the school and the island at all hours of the day and night, organizing whatever business she had prioritized for that day. Seemingly without a care in the world, she projected confidence and a calmness that Sam herself was not feeling.

Willoughby cheerfully pranced after her, though how anyone with his bulk would appear to prance and be cheerful about it, was a mystery to Sam. The cat that hadn't moved in years, other than from one sunspot to the next, had suddenly gained a youthful vigor and the energy to keep up with one of the most on-the-go people Sam had ever known.

Sam was trying very hard not to let it be known how endearing she found the fact that the two gingers were inseparable, the utterly adorable duo doing everything together. They'd developed a rhythm where Willoughby would be snoozing through meetings, but shake himself awake the moment it was time to inspect some construction site or go to another errand. Magdalene would be engaged in her usual spats with Orla over breakfast while cutting salami into little cubes for the cat who was lying patiently at her feet. With or without the salami, however, Willoughby was clearly enraptured, his little purr being heard any and every time Magdalene deigned to scratch his big round head.

And speaking of being enraptured. Sam had not used any particular descriptor to characterize her feelings and neither had Magdalene, but every time their eyes met, she could swear the temperature in the room spiked. The hairs on her neck stood on end, goosebumps running up and down her spine. She was utterly ridiculous in her besottedness and in the expression of that adoration through nonverbal reactions to its object. Sam felt that she was worse than Willoughby. At least he managed to be dignified in his affections, only ever drooling when Magdalene offered treats.

Sam wasn't sure she hit that level of dignity and rather wasn't simply ridiculous. The fact that Lily had taken her aside one day and read her a bit of riot act about being slightly less conspicuous, was probably telling in and of itself.

“Look, it's one thing to moon over the Headmistress while there's only a handful of people at school. Nobody cares that deeply about you at the moment, as everyone is way too busy being awful to each other and stressing out. But in like two days it will

be a total zoo and everyone will be in her business because she's hotter than hot, and since you're already sort of crush-worthy and have your own admirers to beat off with a stick, you really should be hiding whatever it is you've got going on a lot better."

Setting aside some of the utterly ridiculous assertions that Lily had made, especially that Sam somehow had admirers or was—how had Lily put it?—crush-worthy, the kid had a point. In fact, the kid probably had two points as David continued to rather insistently brood over her total lack of interest in him. And while it was extremely new to her to have anyone know about her sexuality and not be totally wretched about it, Sam still tried very hard to hide her ever-expanding emotions where the aforementioned hotter-than-hot Headmistress was concerned.

It was proving kind of difficult though because every day Magdalene would find new ways to make Sam fall deeper and deeper. A flower on her doorstep, a little note with just the outline of her lips in red lipstick, a hot to-go cup of coffee from the coffee shop in town, which given how big of an anathema the town was for the school folks, was a feat in and of itself... In any case, all the seemingly insignificant little gestures spoke volumes.

They could no longer engage in any physical pursuits, nor did they dare talk aloud about their newfound harmony and understanding of each other's motives and nascent emotions, and so Magdalene devised other ways to continue to let Sam know she thought of her, that she cared.

Hence Sam found it difficult to heed Lily's warning to be subtle about her newfound happiness. And how could she, when the night before she had heard scratching and meowing at her door and there was Willoughby, who was rapidly becoming her second-favorite redhead, his collar having been replaced by a flower crown with a sweet note tied to it?

“Is she making you work, boy? I’d say you look cute, but that’s just a bit undignified for a noble gent like yourself, huh?” Willoughby meowed, obviously fully expecting payment for his endeavors. Sam fed him the treats she now kept in her room just for this very type of occasion and took the message and flower crown off him just before he could scurry away in the direction of Magdalene’s apartment.

And that was another thing. It really had been coming for months now, but Sam was astounded at how such a seemingly aloof, cold, and overtly arrogant individual—for that was how Magdalene presented herself—had managed to turn so many of her enemies into outright friends and supporters.

Willoughby, the cat who’d despised everyone, was ensorcelled. Lily, whose fate hung in the balance, dependent solely on Magdalene’s decision, adored her. Joanne, who had been one of the people to put Sam on the warpath against her to begin with, deferred to her more and more these days.

Orla still hated Magdalene’s guts though, and Sam found it very hard to interact with her mentor. She knew Orla considered her disloyal and that she believed Sam had folded when the school’s entire existence was on the line. So they orbited each other with a special kind of care, avoiding personal conversations and even professional ones, engaging in superficial exchanges of greetings, and sticking to innocuous subjects like the weather and other mundane things.

Sam felt the loss as if a dear part of her was missing. She missed their evening discussions, Orla’s wit, and her scandalous adventures with younger men—all of which she’d proudly and hilariously recount to Sam during their weekly teas at Orla’s cottage. It was a difficult situation for Sam to overcome or overlook. On one hand, she could understand the sheer frustration of seeing what could end up as a total dismantlement of Orla’s legacy, but on the other, she couldn’t comprehend Orla’s determination to deny that, one way or the other, her legacy was doomed. Either the school would be neutered but survive, or it would fold entirely.

She looked at the crown weaved from late-blooming daisies and the piece of folded paper with a red lipstick outline and her heart lightened, even as her mind struggled with the feeling of disloyalty yet again.

She shook her head, reaching for the delicate white flowers, holding the crown gently in her hands, marveling at the skill and care put into weaving such an intricate pattern. She'd made her choice, and she'd wear the crown that came with it, be it of daisies or of thorns, because she knew she'd be shunned and ostracized by faculty and students alike when she'd show her hand and profess open and unwavering support for the Headmistress on opening day.

* * *

In the meantime, with no other outlet for her nervous energy and anxiety, Sam continued to do what she could to distract herself from thoughts of either the impending doom predicted for the Headmistress or thoughts of the Headmistress herself. The former was impossible since there was some sort of outcry or scandal to deal with every day, sometimes hourly, due to people panicking, rumors being spread, or Magdalene either firing or hiring somebody—to the massive overreaction of those at the school and outside of it. The latter was even more difficult since Magdalene was doing all that while wearing her signature designer skirts, tailored to perfection to her subtle curves and showing just the right amount of skin to tease Sam mercilessly. Not to mention that, these days, Sam had a very good idea what was underneath those skirts, and the thoughts of garters and stockings were enough to end any other pursuits she could have been entertaining at that moment.

No matter what she did, be it drink her coffee or conduct a staff meeting, Sam's thoughts would inevitably turn either to plans of what she was going to do to Magdalene when she'd get the chance, or to memories of their two nights together. Which, considering it didn't encompass a large amount of time, seemed to have been filled with so many things for Sam to remember, she was in a perpetual state of

arousal. And while she hated the cliché that professed women's panties would be 'ruined' by lustful thoughts about sexual encounters, she'd come to believe that such literary proclamations by romance writers had some foundation to stand on, since her underwear had required a change at least twice just last week alone.

One such incident occurred when she and Magdalene had breakfast with Joanne and a very reluctant Orla one day. George was in and out of the Mess Hall, and effectively it was up to Joanne and Sam to maintain a modicum of civil conversation since Orla was sullen and belligerent the few times she did open her mouth, and Magdalene was never one for small talk to begin with.

Running entirely out of things to chat about, Sam looked around the table and latched onto the new jams that the Mess Hall staff were buying from the local market, at Magdalene's insistence to reduce costs and shop exclusively on the island for most foodstuffs. Right as Joanne and she were launching into singing praises to the blackberry jam, Magdalene suddenly broke the silent sipping of her coffee by saying, "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 blackberry jam toast, Magdalene hid her smirk in her coffee mug, and Joanne and Orla were left staring uncomprehendingly between the two of them.

And how could Sam not choke when all she could think about was the image of Magdalene—naked and relaxed on the debauched bed-and-breakfast bed—running the tips of her fingers up and down the length of Sam's slit as she had lain there in complete and utter post-orgasmic bliss only to be roused by the sound of her lover licking and sucking each and every finger with a rapturous expression? Sam remembered promptly blushing and trying to hide her face in the pillow, but Magdalene had not allowed her. Instead, she'd kissed her deeply, letting Sam taste herself, something that she had never done before, and something that had made her

blush an even deeper crimson.

“You can be such an adorable prude, Sam.” Magdalene’s low purr did sweet, teasing things to Sam’s surprisingly alert-again core.

“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 mumbled something incoherent even to her own ears and burrowed into Magdalene’s embrace. But Magdalene was not to be deterred. The stubborn woman, who seemed to be in the habit of getting anything and everything she wanted, at least in bed, simply shifted and, looking directly into Sam’s eyes, licked her lips, before continuing.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

“Let me tell you what you taste like, darling.” Agile fingers slipped between Sam’s legs, making her gasp, but she 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.” The fingers played with her at a leisurely pace and then descended to her opening, thrusting once, twice, with eerie precision, and when the thumb entered into play, making slow purposeful circles around that clit, Sam was no longer able to keep her eyes open. The last thing she’d remembered before closing them and surrendering to pleasure, had been Magdalene’s smug, satisfied smile.

It was the same kind of expression she was trying to hide by sipping her coffee from the gigantic mug right now, but Sam knew it was there. In fact, she also knew that she had applied herself quite diligently to wiping away that same look on Magdalene’s face at the bed-and-breakfast, once she’d recovered from another post-orgasmic stupor that night.

She had spread Magdalene wide and brought her to the edge over and over again, refusing her satisfaction until she’d begged, until all her moans were ending in little whimpers, until Sam knew she couldn’t take anymore, and then, when she finally relented and sucked on her clit hard, in seconds her chin and mouth were showered with moisture and Magdalene’s smile was no longer smug. Eyes closed, chest heaving, red splotches covering her breasts and marring her perfect skin where Sam had lingered on her way down, Magdalene was a picture of total blissed-out satisfaction.

Initially, Sam wanted to regret marking that beautiful, flawless body, but something stirred in her at seeing what she'd done, at what the marks meant. She kissed each and every one of them as Magdalene recovered. A purpling on her left breast, a larger one on her hip bone, a bite on her inner thigh. She allowed her tongue to come out against the one on the hip, which only caused Magdalene to give out a strangled moan and for weak hands to try to push Sam's head away with a stuttering kind of laughter.

"You're insatiable, you lunatic. I give, I give. Truce. I believe you're the only one who will make me think twice before daring you to do something. You might've broken me just now."

Her voice held no regrets though, and Sam gathered her in her arms, settling Magdalene's head on her shoulder, running still-wet fingers through tangled locks.

"I'm not much for a dare, but I feel like I want to rise to any occasion where you're concerned."

"Well, we can certainly look into things you could rise to in order to get me all concerned."

Sam just stared at her, and then both of them broke into fits of laughter.

"Oh Goddess, even I admit those were terrible puns about dildos." Magdalene laughed freely, happily, and that sound was so foreign and so out of place for this particular woman, that Sam wanted to lock it away in her mind, to relive this very moment over and over again. She had stopped laughing and just watched the joy spread on her lover's face, committing it to memory. It had been glorious.

"I'd be game, though I confess I... ah, I've never done that..."

“Sam, you heartbreakingly beautiful darling. How can you make me squirt for the very first time in my life by being relentless and hot and commanding, and then blush and stutter at the very thought of fucking me with a strap-on?”

“Born this way?” Sam had ducked her head and nuzzled Magdalene’s cheek.

“Thank Goddess for that, Sam. Thank Goddess indeed,” Magdalene had murmured drowsily.

Back at the table in the Mess Hall, as Sam finally raised her head from her coughing fit, she ran straight into Magdalene’s no longer smug gaze. In fact, Sam thought that, if Magdalene wasn’t careful, Sam would throw all caution to the wind and put to good use the strap-on she’d ordered right after their return and received from the online shop just yesterday, and damn the torpedoes, because that look was scorching, telling Sam that Magdalene was reliving the very same moments, with similar consequences for her underwear. Good thing Sam had also ordered several new pairs of those.

George’s clearing of her throat and launching into the agenda of the day distracted both her and Magdalene from a rather sticky situation, pun intended again, and Sam exhaled carefully, focusing on whatever the secretary was trying to impress upon her colleagues—despite it being a massive struggle. Seeing that Magdalene was also having difficulty marshaling her considerable powers of concentration was very satisfactory. This staying apart and waiting business was going to be torturous, but at least Sam wasn’t in it alone.

chomping at the bit, wringing her hands, and trying not to wait while doing nothing but bitch and moan about how much she'd been doing precisely that—waiting for it—she was entirely too unprepared for the true experience that lay ahead.

The first thing that caught her off guard was the sheer amount of people who descended on the island. The first day of school was always a bit of mayhem, with parents accompanying their children and the girls bubbling with excitement. Everything was noise and chaos and just one big pain in her ass, which was something Sam, even under the best of circumstances, hated with all her being. But now? Now that everything was at stake and Magdalene had truly poked pretty much all the hornets' nests within the vicinity of the school, it was all magnified tenfold.

The girls screamed and giggled; the parents talked loudly about how much money they were pumping into the school and how thoroughly worrisome some of the rumors they had heard coming out of the Academy about the potential upcoming reforms were. The faculty were huddling close together, trying as they might to not get pulled aside either by a parent or a student or even worse, a trustee.

Yes, the trustees were all there too, unusual as that was, along with some other people in business suits, and even the Mayor of the town for some reason. He had never attended Opening Day before, and to Sam's knowledge, the townsfolk had never really been invited to any of the school's proceedings. So that was quite a big deal.

Which in and of itself was ridiculous. For being stranded on such a small piece of rock, surrounded by the inauspicious waters of the Atlantic, the school certainly acted like it was somehow better than its smaller, less opulent neighbor. The town's cottages may have been rustic, nestled on the other side of the island on its sandy beaches, but the handful of people who lived there, despite mostly pursuing such mundane—in the school dwellers' minds—livelihoods as fishing, had always been nothing but charming and hospitable.

Sam thought maybe their presence was a good idea, despite the fact that she could see most of the older guard, including the massive contingent of the Old Dragonettes in attendance, throwing highly outraged and superior gazes in the direction of the area where some of the townsfolk had congregated.

And that was another thing. If Sam had to estimate, there were at least two hundred Old Dragonettes present—from older, distinguished, white-haired ladies, to some younger ones whom Sam could remember teaching just a couple of years ago. Turning sharply to look where Orla stood, haughtily surveying everything around her, Sam couldn't help but roll her eyes. So the former headmistress had brought reinforcements. Sam shook her head for good measure, but an arm on her side stopped her before she moved past temptation and actually went and got into an argument.

“I told you before, little one. Having your loyalties torn like this is very hard.” But before Sam could say something snarky in response, because Joanne stating the obvious only managed to aggravate her further especially with Sam's mood already jagged and edgy and anxious, her mentor chuckled and gave her a side-armed hug.

“You will withstand anything, Sammy. I believe in you.”

“Even if it means going against you and Orla?” Sam watched as emotions rippled across the handsome, open face of her mentor, who was more like a mother to her than anyone else in her life.

“I will always love you, Sam Threadneedle. No matter what—or whom—you choose, there isn't a choice that would drive me away from you. I taught you to walk and treated your bottom rash, honey. Sometimes I think you are the child I was actually meant to have. So whatever happens, rest assured, I may not be vocal or loud, and I certainly don't have the backup of two hundred people summoned from all over America,” Joanne whispered slyly and looked at the crowd standing like sentinels

behind Orla, “but I’m here and I have faith in you, baby.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

And just like that, Sam's eyes filled with tears. God, it had been years, during which she'd felt alone and powerless and longed for anyone to just say those words to her. To tell her she belonged, that there was a soul that cared and had her back unconditionally. A flash of red hair in the distance reminded her she had things she stood to lose now, her love, her home—and as she squeezed Joanne's hand—her family. Saving all three may be hard, but just as Joanne had put her faith in Sam, Sam put hers in the imposing woman who was gracefully climbing the steps to the stage in front of the massive crowd and surveying them as if nothing could faze her.

And Sam realized that nothing really could faze this woman. She'd worked hard her entire life to get here. Magdalene had sacrificed and taken step by small, laborious step towards this very moment when she could ring the little bell and a hush would fall among the crowd that must have numbered almost six hundred people, gathered before a wooden stage specifically erected for this occasion on the quad.

Sam wanted to shake herself at how utterly naive she had been, and how amazing Magdalene's foresight was in contrast. Usually, the opening ceremony was held indoors, in the Aula Magna—the big auditorium designed to host all the school invitees. But this year, with Orla organizing her little coup or whatever she thought she was doing, Magdalene had clearly seen through it. So instead of cramming all these people into what surely was too small a space, which would have been a disastrous decision, had instead set up a stage and brought out folding chairs for the students so they could sit front and center. The rest of the guests were left standing in the back and to the sides of the students. The nine trustees were lined up behind Magdalene's lectern like stalwarts, looking important and imposing—and hopefully, Sam thought, most of them were guarding her back.

A shiver ran through her as she looked at Alden, who stood between Timothy and Joel. The latter was periodically leaning into him, trying to get Alden's attention, but he only looked around with a weary and faraway expression, virtually indifferent to whatever Joel was insisting on imparting on him.

Timothy was immersed in observing the crowd, seemingly untroubled by whatever was to come. Perhaps Magdalene had shared her plans with her ex-husband, a thought that irked Sam since Magdalene had not shared much of anything with Sam, her current... paramour? Sam didn't know what to call herself, or what to call Magdalene. Or what to think of the secrecy that she had been subjected to.

All she knew was that Magdalene wanted to save the school. And that Magdalene trusted Sam to stand aside and let her do it on her own terms. This should've warmed Sam somewhat, but instead, she felt chilled by how calm Timothy was, and how she herself stood here, shivering from anticipation and anxiety. And maybe, just maybe, a little jealousy because no matter what, that handsome, expensively-attired man had once had a claim over Magdalene, and Sam was just small enough to envy him that claim, even though Timothy had thrown it all away.

Finally, when the bell rang with clean precision three times, guided by Magdalene's slim, graceful hand, the crowd settled down and Joanne's fingers found Sam's among the bated breaths that seemed to be collectively held as Magdalene discretely cleared her throat.

"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." Sam had to duck her head just a bit. Magdalene might as well have said 'attending it and forgetting about it'. As opening salvos went, Magdalene had named and shamed pretty much all the Old Dragonettes and Orla, who had obviously summoned them to be here today in some misguided attempt at a show of force.

Joanne pinched her elbow, and Sam raised her head again and tried to school her features. Maybe, she thought, Magdalene had been perfectly right to not tell her anything, because, for all of Sam's otherwise famed ingenuity, she still couldn't maintain a straight face or lie worth a damn when on the spot. She took a deep breath as the audience stood in silence, probably trying to figure out if they should be insulted and when to start booing.

“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.”

Sam blinked and felt Joanne's fingers tighten on her elbow again, though perhaps for a different reason this time, since Sam didn't think she'd even moved during that last minute, absorbing every word Magdalene said, together with the other six hundred odd souls, all listening in complete silence.

“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.” A collective gasp was so loud and perfectly synchronized, Sam thought Magdalene was the conductor of an orchestra—one that had her players in the palm of her hand, and with one wave of the baton, they did exactly as she'd commanded them to. A lone cry of ‘LIES’ sounded from behind where she and Joanne stood, and Sam knew right away that Orla—whom Sam could almost feel vibrating with the struggle of not being the center of attention—had finally reached the end of her rope.

Magdalene seemed unimpressed and unsurprised by the outburst. In fact, she didn't even turn her head in the direction of the shout, simply proceeding once silence

reigned again.

“This is fact.”

Three words and a pin could be heard dropping. A conductor indeed, Magdalene ruled the crowd with a perfect blend of power and strategy. She knew what to say, when to say it, and how to say it. She also possessed the amazing gift of pause, which, in times like these, said much more than anything anyone could shout at her, for it gave people time to really digest the information, as well as her assertion that facts were facts, despite what anyone else claimed or believed.

“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.” This time Sam barely managed to hide her smile, because when Magdalene turned on the snark, she was utterly masterful. It was disloyal of Sam to find Magdalene’s barb and backhanded compliment amusing, but she was still so enraged at Orla’s uncooperative, rigid attitude and outrageous behavior—to summon an army to this opening—that she found it difficult to be angry with herself. Beside her, she thought she heard Joanne bite back a snicker, and it was her turn to pinch the older woman.

“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.”

There was some movement to the side and a beautiful, distinguished woman in a black suit stepped closer to 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. 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 louder, the bewilderment clear on everybody’s faces. Some of the trustees looked like they were shell-shocked because Magdalene was beyond irreverent. She was graceful in honoring the true roots of Dragons, but she was also overwhelmingly insulting to pretty much every one of the nine people behind her, who had demanded and heralded the return of the old days. The old days Magdalene was now exposing for what they truly were. But she wasn’t done. As she raised a hand, the crowd, enthralled, simply 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 Lavalley. Reverend Lavalley is one of the first women pastors serving in New England, and we are honored that she has agreed to join our school. Reverend Lavalley 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 Lavalley and her wife to Three Dragons.”

If the previous assertions about the Reverend hadn’t blown the metaphorical doors of the entire school wide open, the fact that Reverend Lavalley, aside from being a feminist, was also a lesbian, surely made pretty much everyone lose it, as the noise level would’ve been through the roof if they had been holding this shindig indoors. She turned to look at Orla, only to find the former headmistress blinking rapidly and looking beyond shocked, standing speechless surrounded by her supporters who were

also lost for words, judging by all the jaws that were hanging open.

Unperturbed, Magdalene proceeded.

“Now, let’s move on to some logistical decisions I had to make in regards 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.”

Magdalene’s smile was razor-sharp, and Sam involuntarily gulped. She was terrifying like this. Terrifying but hot. So hot, Sam clenched her thighs hard together and hoped the sensation of being incredibly turned on would pass soon.

The crowd, in the meantime, while they’d appeared hopeful after Magdalene’s previous statement, was back to wary. And this time, so was the Board. The students fidgeted, the faculty whispered and the trustees, despite being on display, did both.

“Before moving forward, I’d like to inform you that 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. 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. 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. Even the trustees looked somewhat relieved as one of the massive hurdles that absolutely everyone had opposed was overcome with minimal bloodletting.

Sure the inter-House competitions were fun, and the school really had always gone all out during the soccer and lacrosse matches, but what was to stop them from doing so on a bigger scale, defending not just the colors of their respective House but of the whole school? Sam marveled once again at the brilliant mind at work here. Not only had Magdalene managed to circumvent the most controversial battle on the agenda with barely a skinned knee, but she had done so while simultaneously taking the wind out of the Dragonettes' sails.

Magdalene extended a hand, and silence reigned once more. Sam smiled at how easily the people who had come here to express their hatred, their disdain for the Headmistress were now eating out of that very hand, completely enraptured by her actions and her commanding presence. It was Willoughby all over again.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

“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?”

That was a very reasonable question, and Sam braced herself for the simplest answer. Cuts, more cuts, and more cuts on top of those cuts. Sam could see Lily and Amanda stiffen a couple of yards in front of them. At the same time, Joanne clutched her elbow again, but Magdalene did not say anything beyond that, instead flicking through her notes.

“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. 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. Now it was clear what all the commotion on the cliff farthest from the school grounds had been all about. It was also clear why the Mayor and some of the council members were here, alongside the town’s most prominent business people.

As a business decision, Sam thought, it was probably brilliant. The school gave up nothing. The astronomy tower on Viridescent had been abandoned for over twenty years, the neglect slowly becoming hazardous. It was also far enough from the school and other campus holdings to not encourage much foot traffic between the structures. And if push came to shove, the school could always erect a fence to further insulate itself from future tourists.

But it also sent a message of defeat. And Sam was cognizant of that. For two centuries, the school had stood aloof and separate from the township—they never mingled, with the settlement slowly outgrowing its smaller-sized part of the island, but having nowhere else to expand. Its economy was stifled with no more land or opportunities to grow, and the school had resolutely refused to sell any of its vast and mostly vacant holdings. The separation may have started out as callous, but it also kept the students and the faculty entirely safe from anything and everything, since they were so isolated up on the cliffs. Now that was about to change. The town and, horror of horrors, tourists, were going to be part of the school's reality. Sam felt the nervousness thrum in the crowd. And most importantly, Sam felt the outrage build up in several trustees, most of whom were so visibly angry they did not deign to maintain a modicum of impassivity.

With the cacophony rising around her, Magdalene extended her hand again, ringing the small bell, but silence took longer to settle over the crowd this time around. Still, once it descended, she went on.

“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 aggrandized 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.”

She made to leave the podium when a loud, impatient voice from the back rang out, and Sam recognized Orla once again.

“What about the scholarships? What about the students?”

Sam could see Lily, Amanda, Suzie, and the rest of the girls tense, but she had a feeling it was not just because their fate was thrust into the spotlight. Being othered again, so blatantly—even if Orla meant well—had to feel horrible. Unlike most people in the crowd, Sam knew exactly how that felt since she herself had experienced being singled out all throughout her life at Dragons. She was about to intervene somehow, when Magdalene turned back to the microphone, eyes seeking Orla in the crowd.

“What about Dragons’ students, Professor Fenway?”

Suddenly, just by the way Magdalene worded her question, Sam realized that it would all be all right. In fact, if she’d only cottoned on sooner to the way Magdalene had always treated Lily and the other girls—with unreserved fairness and kindness and generosity—Sam might have saved herself some sleepless nights. Because Magdalene always acted as if there was no decision to be made at all. As if—

“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.”

Sam could feel Joanne exhale next to her ear and felt herself relaxing.

“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!”

If Sam hadn’t already been totally and completely in love with Magdalene Nox, this would be the moment she would have slid all the way into the overwhelming feeling. Standing there, the sun behind her shining bright like a halo, setting the tips of her hair on fire, she looked ethereal, like an avenging angel fallen to the earth, not to scorch it, but to save it.

18

Of After-Action Reports & Unbridled Courage

All hell broke loose. The moment Magdalene stepped off the stage the students were on their feet and on the go. Some people were cheering, some booing, some quietly making their way out of the courtyard and towards where the previously advertised refreshments were set up.

Joanne was still clutching her elbow, and Sam turned to either untangle herself or see if she needed help, but found the older woman grinning like the cat who had gotten the canary.

“What?”

“Oh my goodness, child, that was a spectacular display of gamesmanship if I ever saw one. Now, don’t look at me like that. I was just as hoodwinked as everyone here, but what a way to twist and turn everyone inside out.”

Sam was about to answer when a shaggy tornado nearly mowed her off her feet, quickly followed by another, and she found herself with her arms full of teenagers. Lily and Amanda were either laughing or squealing, Sam wasn’t quite sure which, but she thought she understood the sentiment. The moment was quite magnificent, even if somehow anticlimactic at the same time.

“Did you fucking see that?”

“Language, young lady!” Joanne’s rebuke didn’t sound strict enough, and Lily simply grinned, showing off her mischievous dimples.

“But did you see that?” The kid was glowing. Happy and carefree, and despite her earlier assurances that she would simply accept the decision regarding Dragons’ scholarships, Sam could tell by the relaxed set of the thin shoulders and the elated expression on the pale face that a heavy weight had been lifted. Sure, Lily with her prodigious talent would have found a way to get funding for her tuition somewhere else, but she’d have probably been separated from Amanda, and Sam saw how important the girls had become to each other during the course of the summer. It was a beautiful sight.

And so Sam hugged the giggling girls, and within a few seconds felt Joanne’s arms come around all three of them. Talk about a weight being lifted. Sure, some of Magdalene’s decisions were highly controversial, the hotel and the program cuts were bound to be problematic, but what a way to make the school sustainable despite the dwindling endowment. Also, what a way to make enemies on both sides of the aisle.

And speaking of enemies, Sam’s heart clenched as she looked above Lily’s shaggy

head, where Orla quietly spoke to some of the Old Dragonettes who surrounded her. Her expression was grim, mouth tight, and a deep groove between her eyebrows seemed to only grow deeper as the conversation progressed. Sam sighed. Perhaps she had been a coward for too long to allow Orla free rein and an unchecked run in this useless opposition she was playing at. Sam knew that Orla was at Dragons by the grace of Magdalene's goodwill and Sam's pleading as much as anything else. But it seemed that Sam herself had empowered this enmity—that was stubborn to the point of stupidity—to any and all reform of the school. Gently extricating herself from Lily's embrace, she made to join the former headmistress when an arm on her shoulder stopped her progress. Stanton Alden looked even older and frailer up close than he had sitting on the stage.

“Professor Threadneedle.” He bowed his head slightly in greeting and let his hand drop from the light shawl she now clutched around herself in defense against unwanted approaches as much against the early morning island chill.

“Mr. Alden, good morning. How can I help you?”

His face contorted into a semblance of a smile, which—for a second—she thought reflected sincerity and some strange warmth that was entirely misplaced coming from this particular man, whom she’d only ever known for his coldness and his detachment.

“Ah, yes, you can actually. I’d like you to join me and the trustees at an impromptu conference with the esteemed Headmistress.” He shrugged in that unaffected manner of his and made a motion with his chin, indicating towards where the rest of the trustees were milling towards the Main Hall. Magdalene was far ahead of all of them, striding purposefully and gracefully, head held high. Sam couldn’t help but smile watching the procession.

“Ah, is this the discussion of the after-action report? Will there be mortality and morbidity statistics, as is pertinent to every military operation review?” Sam couldn’t hide the sarcasm. The fact that these inept people, who had done nothing but undermine the school for years, dared to now upbraid the one headmistress who actually endeavored to try to save it, was preposterous.

But Alden did not take offense, in fact, he chuckled, his laughter sounding almost painful, gravelly to the point of sickly. Yet his joy seemed genuine again, reaching his watery grey eyes.

“Well, I was going to request the ‘lessons learned’ follow-up, but what does this Navy man know, huh, Professor? An after-action review is what we shall have then, if you so kindly insist.”

Still smiling, he offered her his arm, and not taking it felt awkward if not downright rude. Sam, who never shied away from being rude when rudeness was called for, decided to pick her battles for now and took his elbow, following him as he steered her through the crowd.

* * *

When they approached the Headmistress' office, raised voices could be heard from the hallway. George stood sentry at the entrance and threw a concerned glance towards them, shaking her head at Sam's inquiring look. Into the breach, then. Sam, still clinging to Alden's arm, entered the crowded room and instantly regretted her gesture, for Magdalene's impassive face changed at what she must have perceived as Sam's support of the oldest trustee.

"... 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 did not seem to take note of the new arrivals, kept raging.

"I do not need to consult with the Board on such matters, Mr. Tullinger." Magdalene's cool answer only made him froth at the mouth.

"How in the hell..."

"Joel—" Alden's quiet rebuke finally penetrated everyone's conscience and silence reigned.

But Magdalene cut him off.

"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.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Sam could see that Orla had joined them and was quietly standing by the door, with George hiding behind her broad shoulders. Well, with all the parties in the same room, hopefully they'd come to a resolution of some kind. She still had no idea why Alden wanted her there, so Sam kept her council for the moment.

Before Joel could masticate on the information that Magdalene had imparted, it was one of the older trustees, Rolffe, who had obviously decided that, since he'd been silent for more years than Sam had been alive, it was finally time to say his piece.

“The letter of the contract may have been respected, Ms. Nox. But not the spirit. This school belongs to the trustees—”

“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.”

Sam could see Joel already frothing at the mouth, gearing up for whatever insults and accusations he usually excelled at, the little rat, and the other trustees weren't far behind. Only Timothy maintained his silence, along with Alden, who still held Sam's hand on his forearm. Sam almost wanted to applaud the derision that filled Magdalene's rebuke. She had never known her to be conceited or to insist anyone call her 'Doctor'. In fact, some of the faculty called her by her first name when in private. But Rolffe and Joel needed to be put in their place for disrespecting her, and Magdalene had done so handily.

Surely sensing the anger in the room, Willoughby uncharacteristically did not depart as he normally did to avoid any ruckus, and instead chose to stand on his pillow and hiss at Joel. Before the cat—or George for that matter—could launch and rip Tullinger’s face off, Sam’s protectiveness kicked in. Someone had to step up and be honest. Sam remembered Magdalene’s words of being hunted and felt compelled to stop the wolves from circling and charging.

“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?”

“Excuse me, young lady?” Rolffe’s bushy eyebrows climbed all the way up his massive forehead.

At the utterance of such a humiliating moniker, Sam’s famed temper was severely tested.

“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.”

Sam looked around to find every single pair of eyes in the room focused on her. Some were wide with shock, others looked pleased, and Magdalene’s were twinkling with something akin to mischief.

“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.”

Since keeping a leash on her anger and disappointment was no longer an option, Sam reached for eloquence instead. If she was going to go up in flames, the least she could do was do it in style and make sure everyone understood her reasons for it.

“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? 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!”

If Magdalene’s displeasure at seeing Sam walk in on Alden’s arm had stemmed from doubting her loyalties, Sam was pretty sure any and all such doubts were laid to rest after her outburst.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

The silence was deafening. Even Willoughby was no longer hissing, sitting on his haunches, tail wrapped around his legs, watching her with his head turned slightly to the side. The trustees were clearly astonished by her audacity, one and all, and even George had her mouth open in stupefaction.

Before Sam could say anything else, a slow, showy clap sounded somewhere close to the open door. Orla stepped around her, turned to face the room, and continued to applaud. After an awkward moment, to Sam's shock, Alden joined in, and then Timothy. Within a minute only Joel, Rolffe, and to Sam's disappointment, Magdalene were not applauding.

"From the mouths of babes then." Orla gave her 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."

Ah, so Orla was stealing the show again. Sam huffed. So what else was new. Self-righteous so-and-so. And white knight standup act? How dare she?

Before Sam could get on her soapbox again, Magdalene intervened smoothly, deftly sidestepping Orla and focusing the attention back on 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!” Joel clearly felt like his 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.”

“Stunt? Whatever could you be referring to...” Magdalene’s theatrical nonchalance was such a blatant counterpoint to Joel’s outburst. She even looked down at her nails, seemingly entranced by her manicure.

“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?”

Sam saw red. “Excuse me?”

Her voice must have been shrill and raised high enough, because suddenly the hush that fell on the room felt like it weighed a ton. Joel’s mouth snapped loudly in the silence of the room, the implications of what he’d just said seemingly catching up to his brain.

“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 now, her chest so full of ire she thought she’d burst. She felt a hand on her forearm and without looking knew it was Alden, trying to hold her back from the storm she was about to unleash, but it was too late. The Fourth Dragon had shed her shackles.

“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 queerpeople ever do to you, Joel? I mean, it’s not like you were even aware that a lesbian broke your nose years ago. 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."

Was it possible for silence to grow even quieter? It certainly seemed like it had. Even Sam's breathing slowed down for a second and when her brain caught up to her mouth, she became aware that Alden's hand was no longer holding her forearm. Every single trustee in the room had shock written across their faces, and Magdalene's eyes held pride. Sam had just come out to the entire Board of Trustees. And there was not a damn thing she'd change, even if she could.

It felt right and righteous at the same time. It felt like the weight of the world no longer resided on her shoulders. It felt like she was free, whole, fulfilled. There would be repercussions for sure, but for now, she basked in the warmth of Magdalene's gaze and in the stupor of the others in the room.

Suddenly everyone started speaking at once, and the cacophony of voices intruded on Sam's mind like a sledgehammer. But the light in Magdalene's eyes did not dim for a second even as she clapped her hands together to ensure everyone's attention was focused on her once again.

"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 Lavalley, 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 were visibly trembling, but Magdalene waited a second longer, letting him sweat before her next words.

“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?”

The secretary nodded emphatically, obviously understanding her orders and taking charge, trying to herd the occupants of the office out of the cramped room.

It looked like, while Joel was visibly shaken and certainly spooked by Magdalene’s not so veiled threat of action against him for his homophobic insinuations, Rolffe still wanted to argue, and just as he opened his mouth to do so, a gravelly, hoarse voice interrupted him with a quiet command of someone used to being obeyed.

“Augustus, you’ve heard Headmistress Nox. The time and place to discuss issues will be determined and we shall all be informed in due time, 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.”

Despite standing with her back to him, Sam knew Alden had been the one to speak, but both his tone and the message behind it surprised her. Rolffe had been spoiling for a continued fight and two sentences from the oldest trustee effectively—even if temporarily until they met again—placing his support behind the Headmistress, shut him up right away. Would wonders never cease?

It was also clear that Orla wanted to say more, not accustomed to not having the last word, but Magdalene simply turned her back on her and on the room, focusing her attention on Willoughby. His loud purring seemed to signal to everyone that this meeting was adjourned and the Headmistress had far more important things to attend to. Such as providing his big, round head with more scratches and pats.

The various other trustees departed with huffy proclamations that they would be talking to lawyers, and the rest of the group simply filed out. Sam was about to leave

too, unsure of Magdalene's response to her earlier outburst, when she heard a murmured, "Thank you," coming from the direction of the Headmistress.

Feeling self-conscious and somewhat undeserving of praise for simply doing the right thing, Sam decided to deflect with a joke and took a step closer to the windowsill, where the cat was purring like a tractor.

"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."

"I must be then, since I know of another kitten who also purrs under my fingertips." Magdalene's gaze, as she turned to Sam, was pure sex. Hot, debauched, unadulterated sex. Sam gulped as her mouth suddenly went dry and looked around to make sure the door was shut.

"Oh, now she cares about closed doors!" Magdalene gave the cat one last pat on the head and stalked toward Sam with all the deadliness of a cruise missile. "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 uncomprehendingly and then decided that understanding was overrated. She licked her lips. Magdalene's eyelids actually fluttered at the gesture, and she took the last step separating them.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

“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 tried to keep up because the events of the day were quickly overwhelming her. Magdalene wasn’t upset or angered. Magdalene was turned on. Sam squeezed her thighs and chose not to say anything, lest she blurt out something dumb. She knew her own history after all, and with how the day was going, she was due to say something stupid any second now.

Magdalene was clearly undeterred by Sam’s silence. She moved even closer, their bodies flush now and whispered directly into Sam’s ear, her lips just a breath away from Sam’s 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.”

The low voice and the breath caressed Sam’s ear like a silk scarf, keeping her still, eager to hear more.

“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, still uncomprehending, but the movement finally brought her skin in contact with Magdalene’s, and the animal inside her snapped the veneer of a leash, and she turned her head further, forgetting entirely where they were and captured those sly seductive lips in a deep, ravenous kiss.

Everything suddenly came crashing down on her, the anxiety of the day, the way Magdalene had looked on the podium, the stand she herself had taken in this very office, her coming out. The risk, the reward, and the energy all of that had stirred up, drove her to grab and grasp and tug at Magdalene until she had her against the wall, in full make-out mode, lips gliding, teeth nipping, and Magdalene making delicious little whimpers in between drawing ragged breaths. As she moved her mouth to lick at the exposed neck, the sound coming from Magdalene only grew louder, as she was leaning back, her head thrown in utter glorious abandon.

A quick knock on the door made them both jump about a foot in the air and then away from each other so quickly, Sam almost lost her footing. She hoped that whatever was left of Magdalene’s lipstick wasn’t smudged all over her face and lifted an unsteady hand to wipe her mouth.

Magdalene fared a bit better as she reached deep within herself for her cool and detached face, despite her dress not being quite set to rights. Still, when the door opened without her having to call ‘come’, her rigid shoulders went lax. George appeared like a whirlwind, arms full of papers and files. Any hope that Sam might have had that George would perhaps misunderstand what she had nearly walked in on was quickly discarded as she took one look at the secretary’s face. It turned pale and then, in a blink of an eye, beet red. George opened her mouth to say something, then seemed to reconsider and could not quite raise her eyes to either Sam or Magdalene. The latter, however, visibly relaxed, her posture languid as she took a couple of steps

back towards Sam and took her hand. Now Sam was the one left shell-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, noticeably recovered by then, giggled and preened at the praise.

“Oh yeah, Maggie and I have been through pretty much everything together, haven’t we Maggie?”

The nickname grated, as it always did. Sam knew the women were close, but the sheer ease with which George made free with it disturbed Sam for some reason. Still, Magdalene did not object and Sam chose to keep her mouth shut for once. George left the paperwork on the pristine desk and departed with a long look and a wink directed at her friend, and when the door closed Sam squeezed the hand still holding hers and tugged gently until Magdalene was fully in her arms again. But her lover simply pecked her on the nose in an adorable gesture before stepping out of the embrace.

“You make me a little crazy, Sam.”

“Just a little?” Sam already felt bereft without Magdalene in her immediate proximity. But the bicolored eyes still looked at her with the same affection and pride, and Sam was pacified somewhat.

“Are you okay though, Sam? The coming out was impressive, but were you really ready for it?” Magdalene’s concern warmed Sam’s heart.

“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?" The jealousy spiked like acid and burned deep, despite the fact that Sam knew she was being ridiculous.

"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."

"Indeed. But I mean it. 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 her voice held that pleading note that appeared so seldom that Sam knew she'd give her everything and anything she wanted, even if

that meant space and time apart. Even if it would hurt like hell. “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 local son the premises.”

Sam tugged on her hand again and Magdalene went reluctantly. But still, her arms came around Sam with no reservations once they were face to face. They kissed and kissed again, soft, easy kisses that were more promises than reality. Their foreheads touching, Sam closed her eyes and nodded, and she could feel Magdalene exhaling, the sigh of relief palpable against her mouth. She could do this. She could wait. She would support this woman and her plans to save Sam’s home. She would do this. They would do this together.

19

Of Unexpected Threats & Chalk Hearts

Despite knowing that avoiding Orla was no longer an option, Sam still believed she had more time to confront her mentor. However, when she stepped out of Magdalene’s office, still dazed and so in love her heart felt punch drunk, she ran into a scene that made her sober up in an instant.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

The former headmistress had Lily cornered in the hallway, both their faces serious and Lily's telegraphing so much misery that Sam knew her time to dodge the former Headmistress was up.

At her approach, Orla sprang away from their student, giving Lily just enough time and space to scramble sideways and away, throwing Sam a grateful look over her shoulder.

"Professor Fenway, is there trouble?"

Orla's entire face contorted.

"I'm not some street thug looking to shake down people in the hallways of our venerated Academy! Who do you think you are to speak to me this way?"

So that was how it was going to be. Orla was beyond upset and lashing out. Still, better Sam than Lily bearing the brunt of what would certainly be an unpleasant conversation. Sam's breath was coming out fast and her hands were shaking, but she squared her shoulders and stepped into the breach.

"Not only do I stand by having this conversation with you, but I also should have had it some time ago. Clearly, your campaign against Headmistress Nox has escalated beyond reasonable limits, since you're now resorting to cornering students who are benefitting from her tenure at Dragons in the hallways..."

"Benefitting? That's rich!"

Sam wanted to hit her head against the nearest stone wall. How was it that one of the most intelligent women in her acquaintance was also one of the most stubborn and unreasonable?

“Orla, the war is over. For better or worse—and for now, it is certainly for better—Magdalene Nox is headmistress of Dragons. The school not only has a chance to survive, it has a chance to flourish—”

“Flourish? That’s preposterous. With all the strangers on campus, constantly distracting the girls, accosting them, this hallowed ground will stop being the safe haven it has been for them for years. Children like Lily and Amanda and Suzie and, in fact, pretty much every girl at this school, are no longer safe here! Can’t you see it?”

The urge to now bang Orla’s head against the wall, rather than her own, was growing stronger by the second.

“Why wouldn’t Lily and Amanda and the girls be safe? What could possibly jeopardize them? Lily and Suzie have lived on the island their whole lives. Their parents are part of the community. What is the danger to the girls? And why Lily and Amanda and Suzie of all people—”

Orla’s look of complete disgust, as if Sam was a total moron, stopped her in her tracks.

“After your earlier revelation, surely you of all people should understand this. Because they are different and we need to do all we can to keep them away from—”

“Excuse me?” Something in Sam’s face must have made Orla rethink her words because she suddenly rushed to explain herself.

“What I mean to say—”

But Sam had had enough. Enough of this day, enough of Orla, enough of people saying and doing things with seemingly good intentions, only to mess everything up more. Weren't there plenty of proverbial roads to hell paved around this place already? Surely all the good intentions were superfluous at this point, especially when they were as misplaced as the one Orla was proffering now.

“I think you should apologize here and now, and then go find the girls and apologize to them too, for even considering them not good enough to make an impact on this world. To hold their own. To make their own way. These children are a blessing, a gift. Amanda is a brilliant mathematician, Lily is one of the most talented people I know. The sky is their limit. And you want to hide them away? They deserve every chance they can get. They deserve to be celebrated, not hidden.”

Orla took several steps away from Sam, stopping by the window overlooking the patio where some of the girls could be heard playing raucously. Her shoulders sagged and she ran her fingers through her long hair. Sam wondered when her friend had gotten so much greyer, when her eyes and mouth had acquired the deep-set wrinkles. This situation was clearly taking its toll on the former headmistress as well.

“I'm sorry. I think I'm not taking this well.”

“The changes, you mean? Because no, you really aren't. The school needs unity now. Isn't it enough that we're on extremely shaky ground with the more conservative parents' groups, with the trustees, and with god knows who else, if the attacks on the headmistress are any indication? Do we need to also be fractured from the inside?”

Sam stepped closer, and they stood side by side, watching the children chase each other, oblivious to the storm rocking the adults in their world.

“I don’t know what’s happening anymore. All I’ve ever wanted was to keep the girls safe. Safe and happy and educated in an inclusive environment that would broaden their horizons and give them the very best. How are they to have the very best when that woman has cut most of the innovative and progressive programs? When she has invited strangers, tourists, criminals on the grounds?”

Sam wanted to roll her eyes at Orla’s words.

“Yes, that woman has cut programs and leased the astronomy tower, but how else is she supposed to keep the school alive? I know you disagree with her...”

Taking Sam by surprise, Orla whirled on her.

“I know the reason why you don’t disagree with her. After your little performance in the office just now, some puzzle pieces have finally fallen into place for me. I may have not been paying attention for months, I was rather preoccupied to notice your ridiculous infatuation.” Orla’s laughter echoed, taunting and broken in the long, empty corridor. “Believe me, I have much to say about the lack of ethics involved in that gross display of unprofessionalism on your and Nox’s part. But if you want to lecture me further, please go ahead. Though you should consider your words very carefully when you have forgotten all loyalty, all decency, for a piece of ass!”

“Orla!” Sam staggered back as if slapped. She may as well have been, because the words certainly felt like a palm across the face.

“I mean every word, Samantha Anne Threadneedle. You are not one to lecture me on this issue. In fact, on any of these issues. Maybe I’m not entirely correct on my reasons to want to keep the girls safe, but I’ll be damned if I will take advice from someone who is so whipped, so tightly wrapped up by the wiles of that woman, that she can’t even see straight. Or, well, turns out straight wasn’t ever your thing, to begin with.” Now Orla’s eyes flashed with malice, and Sam recoiled even further.

Something about the sheer drivenness that was written all over Orla's face resembled madness, and Sam felt both deep insult and humiliation, but also pity.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

“I know that when you look back at this conversation, you will regret your choice of words and their sentiment, Orla. I’ve known you all my life, you raised me, and I’ve never known you to be homophobic or cruel.”

“Do not patronize me! I nursed your colds and bandaged your skinned knees, and this is the thanks I get.”

The words echoed those that Joanne had spoken earlier in the day, yet these lacked any genuine affection Jo’s had been filled with. In the face of such a drastic contrast, Sam braced for more hits to come, but couldn’t keep silent.

“I didn’t realize that you wiped my nose and bandaged my knees for gratitude. Because I am grateful. Very much so. But my gratitude and the fact that I’m beholden to you for being kind and raising me and supporting me does not change the fact that you are way out of line right now. And I will be speaking to the Ethics Board regarding your homophobic comments.”

“Threatening me, are you now, Sam? I’d think twice if I were you.”

The clearing of a throat from a mere couple of feet away made both of them jump, and Sam was both annoyed and delighted to see George.

“Is everything all right here, Professors?”

With a last, decidedly mean-spirited glare, Orla staggered away in a cloud of her signature perfume. Roses, the smell Sam had always found dependable and true, suddenly felt oppressive and overwhelming again. She’d come full circle on her

dislike for the flower, it seemed.

With George still looking at her with overt curiosity, Sam just shook her head and set out in the opposite direction to where Orla had disappeared. She was halfway to the dormitories before she realized that, at this given moment, she had no idea where she needed to be. Stopping, she simply leaned against the window, put her forehead against the cool glass, and closed her eyes.

She knew she was right, from the scholarship girls, to Magdalene, to her own goddamn snotty nose and skinned knees, she was right about everything and yet her confrontation with Orla still left a bitter taste in her mouth and a deep ache in her chest. This woman was as good as a mother to her. She and Joanne had filled a hole that was still burning inside her, the one that kept yearning for a parent, for unconditional love and attention, and a hug from someone who gave a damn about her, blood or no blood. To now have that woman turn on her like this, with so much malice and contempt?

Sam opened her eyes to realize she had been standing rooted to this spot for quite some time and that she still had duties related to Opening Day to fulfill. Her own broken heart would have to be set aside. She had a feeling that Orla might come around and see how wrong she was. The older woman was impulsive and stubborn. She had also said some pretty damn inexcusable things that Sam was sure did not represent who she really was. But the pain she had caused Sam with those words, whether she meant them or not, was so real and so sharp.

Sam's eyes fell on a nail that was sticking out of the old wooden window frame for some reason. She raised her hand and pulled it out easily, as rusty and as old as it was. But the jagged hole remained in the wood, and Sam thought that this was perhaps the perfect metaphor for what had happened today between her and Orla. Her mentor would come back, would apologize, but the damage was done. Orla might pull the rusty nails she'd hammered into Sam today, but the holes were here to stay.

Shaking her head at her own silly attempt to romanticize the frankly appalling situation, Sam threw the rusty nail into the first trash can she could find. For all she knew, Orla would never apologize, and Sam had made up an entire metaphorical scenario in her overeager imagination. It was time to get back to work, and it was time to put both headmistresses out of her mind. For polar opposite reasons, the current and former one had taken too much space in Sam's calendar today, and she had children to supervise.

* * *

The evening found her on the Amber Dragon Cliff with a piece of chalk. She'd noticed it on her way up the path and for some reason had picked it up. Mindlessly, she was doodling on the smooth rock face when she heard the now-familiar steps behind her. As always, before Magdalene made her appearance Willoughby trotted silently ahead of her. He bumped his big ginger head into Sam's side, as if acknowledging her presence, then headed to a small, grassy knoll not too far, as though to not lose his mistress from sight, but also to not be disturbed in his doze by the impending conversation. He made biscuits on the grass for a moment before settling his bulk down, facing the humans as his eyes slowly closed, unperturbed by the melancholy of the moment or the chilly wind blowing in from the ocean.

"I had no idea you could draw." Magdalene's voice sounded from above Sam's head before the Headmistress settled down next to her, but not until she'd placed a shawl on Sam's shoulders. The garment smelled like jasmine, and Sam inhaled fully, having missed the spring scent, and the scent of this woman, despite the fact that she'd kissed her just this morning. Sam seemed to always miss her. Since she'd first seen her in that bar all those months ago, she had been unable to get her fill. To gulp in enough as to not feel the absence of Magdalene like a gaping wound every time she left the room.

"Although I may have overstated whatever it is you're doing here, Sam." The low,

sensual chuckle interrupted Sam's meandering thoughts and made her arms erupt in goosebumps before she registered the slight insult.

"I was doodling."

"Whatever you say, darling." The smile she received was indulgent and fond, although a little sad around the edges.

"What happened?" Sam reached out and clasped Magdalene's wrist in her chalky hand, leaving white smears on already pale skin. Upon seeing the marks she was leaving, Sam let go of the delicate joint, missing the contact immediately.

"Can I answer that question with an amusing joke instead?" Magdalene had a half-smile on her face, a bit sly as if she was trying to get away with something. Sam decided to let her. For now.

"Okay."

"I found a mouse in my office today. Or, to be perfectly honest, Sir Willoughby found it."

Sam's stomach clenched.

"Another dead critter? I thought this whole thing stopped after we talked to the cops."

"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.

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 catanda dirty carpet.”

Sam and Magdalene exchanged incredulous looks, then stared at the tom 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?’”

The smile died down in Magdalene’s eyes, and she absently rubbed her arms, warding away the chill of the night. Or the foreboding conversation that Sam had a feeling would follow.

“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.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

“Not mine.” Sam desperately wanted to reach out and touch her again, even if only to run her fingers up and down the slim forearms. But she focused on her chalk instead, afraid that if she made contact even with a single fingertip, she wouldn’t be able to stop. “And not Lily’s or Amanda’s or Suzie’s or any of the scholarship girls either. In fact, you made them very happy.”

Magdalene sighed.

“I wish things were different.”

“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.”

“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.”

“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 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's smile was sly again, and Sam knew it was time to get back to what really ailed her lover.

"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?"

Sam finally gave in to the impulse to touch. But she only squeezed the graceful slim wrist again, effectively wiping away the earlier chalk marks she'd left there. If only more things were as easily erased. Magdalene watched the movements of Sam's fingers and finally 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, acknowledging the point, but still upset enough about the whole

situation.

“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 so tenderly Sam wanted to cry.

“Am I this transparent, Magdalene?” Her words were barely above a whisper as she echoed Magdalene’s earlier question. Eyes more amber than blue lit up with warmth and adoration, and for a second Sam thought she’d be kissed, but at the last moment Magdalene just booped her nose and settled her hand back in her own lap.

“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’s eyes remained serious. “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 looked at the enormity of the ocean in front of her, fearless and relentless. She felt small in comparison, but the steady presence beside her seemed to prop her up.

“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." Sam could see a smile tugging at Magdalene's lips, and desperately wanted to reach out and touch the corner of that sweet mouth, to caress it, to feel the lips stretch underneath her fingertips. Add this one to the pile of things she wished she could do and regretted not being able to.

"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."

The lips Sam had just been fantasizing about stretching into a warm smile was her reward for her ramblings. Magdalene seemed content with the answer she received and chose to change the subject.

"I see you're drawing—if we can generously call it that—chalk hearts. Any occasion?"

Sam smiled 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."

Magdalene blinked, her face impassive, yet somehow radiant.

Page 55

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

“You saw me earlier, Sam.” There was a gentle rebuke right beneath the softly spoken words.

“Ha, I thought exactly the same thing. That I tasted you just this morning.”

“Sam...” The word was more moan than any other sound, and Sam’s stomach clenched with want.

“I miss you all the time. Maybe that’s why I’m sitting here drawing hearts.”

“They keep getting wiped out. And if that isn’t some kind of a metaphor...”

“Today is just freaking chock-full of metaphors!” Exasperated Sam got up, mindful of the shawl, and picked up the chalk again, drawing bigger, if not prettier hearts, in the space of the ones disappearing under the onslaught of the drizzle and the wind.

Magdalene just watched her, head cocked to the side, the expressive eyes in sharp relief on the pale face. The silence felt brittle, like something was just beyond Sam’s reach but too fragile to be grasped and brought to light. Still, Sam tried.

“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.”

“I’m no angel, Sam.”

“Would you stop interrupting for once, you aggravating woman?!” Sam paced

around, startling Willoughby with her exasperated tone. He raised his head and gave her a disgruntled half-meow before settling back down.

Magdalene stared at her, clearly 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.”

“Damn you, Sam Threadneedle.” And with just that curse, Sam found her arms full of Magdalene who was up from the ground in one second and kissing her the next. Well, she could take being cursed and damned like this. She very much could, when the beloved, now familiar lips, devoured her with so much passion, so much hunger. When the tongue she was intimately familiar with thrust into her mouth with this much determination to steal her breath away. When the hands that she had kissed and knew every inch of, and that had loved her so well, roamed her back before settling on the nape of her neck, sending little shocks up and down her spine and straight between her legs. So let her be damned. As long as she had this, she’d take her damnation and wait as long as she needed to.

20

Of Pining & Reckless Rendezvous

The next month was daunting but fulfilling. The school year was in full swing. Between integrating the new scholarship children, working on a truncated curriculum,

traveling to Connecticut for an extended weekend of Dragons competing with the New Haven St. Mary Private School for Girls in an ad-hoc tournament and trouncing them squarely, and helping Lily submit her paintings to the Vivian DeVor College Scholarship Fund for LGBTQIA Youth, Sam really thought she'd have very little time to pine for Magdalene.

Except every single thing she did made her think of the Headmistress more and more. Scholarship girls—Magdalene's initiative to expand support for vulnerable kids. Connecticut—Magdalene putting an effective stop to in-school fighting and animosity by uniting the Houses in their competitive desire to win against an outsider, instead of being pitted against each other. Lily and Amanda and the rest of the gang continuing to have every opportunity to excel, and proceeding to do so at pretty much everything—including having a real shot at wonderful opportunities at some of the best schools in the country after they'd graduate Dragons. During her days, everything around Sam served as a reminder of the extraordinary woman she had given her heart to.

Sam did not need any aide-memoires for the nights. Awake or in slumber, Magdalene haunted her. Memories of their time together, the feeling of her skin, the taste of her essence, the slide of her mouth against Sam's. The cheeky nip at her bottom lip, or a low-pitched, almost indecent whine when Sam had taken her time and teased her for too long. Of course, Sam would then prolong the torture even more, transforming the whine into a full-blown scream, as, after all the edging and teasing, Magdalene would come hard, again and again.

To say that the fact that she could absolutely transform this severe, no-nonsense, all-business woman into panting, moaning, and screaming, sweaty putty in her hands made Sam proud, was an understatement. Did it make her cocky? Sure. Did it make her swagger just a little and have an extra spring in her step? You bet. But it also made her feel unbelievably privileged to be the one who got to see Magdalene let go. To be the one who was allowed to do that. To be the one who had the power to do it.

Of course, no amount of power or swaggering—or anything else for that matter—made a repeat of something like that remotely possible, considering the entire school was in session and watching Magdalene like hawks. Numerous parents had expressed their displeasure to the trustees. Two even unenrolled their children from the school, displeased either by Magdalene's decision to install a lesbian reverend or cut programs they deemed essential.

Others, like Orla, continued to undermine Magdalene left and right for her 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. However, if the slow-but-sure transformation was anything to go by, the finished product was going to be a state-of-the-art hotel, and staying there would surely cost an arm and a leg, and would thus be unlikely to attract anyone from a different—and much frowned upon by them—social strata than the families of the very wealthy Dragons' students.

So Sam stayed away from Magdalene. And pined. On the mornings when the whole school had breakfast in the Mess Hall, she couldn't take her eyes off her. She guessed she wasn't getting any better at hiding her emotions and was pretty obvious in her longing, since Joanne had swatted at her under the table one day and then winked at Sam's scandalized expression.

But Sam couldn't help but watch those long-fingered hands play with the first cup of morning coffee, trace the rim of the mug, slowly stir the golden liquid with the silver spoon, savor the feeling of the hot mug in both palms, warming those always slightly chilly hands. And then the cup would be raised to that sensuous mouth and full lips would touch the edge of it, and the long line of the throat would work, enjoying the prolonged sip, and Sam would need to cross and recross her legs, pressing her thighs together to alleviate some of the tension. Who knew a cup of coffee could be this sexy?

Granted, Sam thought absolutely everything Magdalene did was sexy. Standing in front of the school, announcing some new policy, holding the fate of hundreds of people in those carefully manicured hands, walking the graceful walk with those subtle curves of her hips swaying, slowly scratching Willoughby's fur—when she believed nobody was watching—from between his ears down to the tip of his nose, making him purr like a well-oiled machine. Sitting in her chair, gently biting the tip of her pen before she used it to sign some poor schmuck's life or death order. Yawning demonstratively when Orla pontificated on the sanctity of the Dragons' land.

Yeah, Sam was fully aware she was completely gone for Magdalene. Just lost. Stupid with it too, since, despite her valiant attempts at schooling her features to some extent, even Lily—in the throes of a massive first love herself and following Amanda around campus like a veritable lovesick puppy—would tease her mercilessly. Thank god that girl was tactful and only chose to be a complete and utter smartass and pain in Sam's behind when they were alone.

And through it all, through the yearning and silent gazes and slow smiles, the love that Sam carried in her heart only grew. Sitting on Amber Dragon in the quiet of the evenings, sometimes with Magdalene, but more often alone as to not tempt fate, she watched the darkening horizon, the reds and oranges, the purples and the pinks of the ocean disappearing under the dark blue blanket of the night and thought that sharing this beauty one day in the open with the one who held her heart would be worth it. Because every day, love was making a bigger space inside Sam. It was pulling the roots of her fear and anxiety, one by one, until there were precious few, until a single glance across the quad was enough to sustain her. To serve as benediction. To give her strength and patience.

And then Magdalene still found ways to make Sam feel cherished. To make Sam feel like she wasn't all alone with her emotions. A flower, another missive through Willoughby's collar, a gentle touch of their knuckles as they passed each other just a

little too closely in the hallways. And when those small gestures were no longer enough, Magdalene would find major ways to remind Sam of what they had and what they shared, like sneaking into Sam's room on their trip to Connecticut and surprising her with a set of crimson lingerie that had Sam nearly out of her mind within seconds, taking Magdalene first against the door the moment she'd dropped her trench coat to reveal the Agent Provocateur creation, and then on the floor by the bed, before taking the Headmistress from behind, on her hands and knees on the bed, face down, biting the pillow so hard that Sam had to pay the hotel for the ruined item.

Sam did not mind the price of a pillow. Sam did not mind the sleepless night. Sam did not mind the wrist cramp or the crick in her neck. Sam didn't even care about the slight sprain of her jaw, because she had been relentless and had not allowed Magdalene out of her room until the early morning hours after they'd both lost count of the number of orgasms Sam had drawn out of her. It was all worth it, even if Sam had overheard George asking Magdalene if she'd slept okay the next day because she was spacing out during their breakfast conversation and looked slightly worse for wear.

Sam tried to pretend it had nothing to do with her edging Magdalene until she'd begged, until she came gushing, until she bit her own hand, leaving marks, in order not to scream and wake up half the hotel. The fact that Magdalene had a bandaid on her hand this morning, to hide the teeth marks from the prying eyes of the world, made Sam wince in sympathy. She had kissed that injured hand afterward, tracing the small but deep imprints the incisors had left with her tongue with deliberate care and precision. It had only led to Magdalene encouraging her to climb in her lap and ride that very hand until Sam had come with a strangled moan and a whispered 'I love you'.

So while Magdalene was making every single overture in the book, including some from the Kamasutra, to ensure that Sam knew how much she, too, missed her, she had not said those three most craved for words back.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

They had time though. Sam knew they had time. If things turned out the way they'd planned, Magdalene's contract would be extended after a successful year of the school overcoming the worst of the hurdles, and she would have more freedom to inform the trustees about their relationship and to receive whatever permission was necessary for such a thing. Sam did not want to think about all the possible scenarios this could unfold into if no permission was forthcoming. She knew how much the school meant to Magdalene.

But quite suddenly, and even with all the overwhelming passion and affection pouring out of Magdalene for her, Sam uncharacteristically found herself jealous. During her darkest hours of longing and loneliness, Sam felt like she was in constant competition with the school. She never thought she'd resent Dragons, the one place that was her home, that had given her a sense of family and belonging, but here she was, resenting the hell out of the gothic buildings, the hallowed grounds, the crowds of kids and meddling faculty, and all the people who had no business intruding on the two of them.

She told Magdalene that she understood her dreams and her ambitions and that she'd wait, but on those lonely nights, in her bed, under the covers, while she dutifully waited, Sam did wonder why the school came first. Was Sam projecting her own fears and past trauma of being abandoned? Of mattering so little that her father probably hadn't cared a jot when her mother died and she'd been left, a newborn all alone in the world?

Hugging her pillow on those nights, Sam tried to shake off the ugly feeling, tried to chalk it up to her own insecurities, and it usually passed by morning, when she would see Magdalene at breakfast and the grey veil would lift from her heart. But then 3

AM would return and Sam would lie awake, twisting and turning and hoping that they would have their time.

Until that time ran out. To say that Sam did not see it coming was the understatement of the century. Because for all of her looking out for Magdalene, she had forgotten to look out for herself. Hadn't she suspected deep down that Magdalene might have been wrong in her assumption that the initial attacks had simply missed their mark and hit Sam instead of her? Or did the soy milk incident really lull her into a strange state of completely forgetting that she herself was quite vulnerable?

She should have known better when a note made its way to her desk at the very end of a particularly long and grueling Friday. Magdalene had never left her notes like this before. Willoughby would most often deliver the previous missives, and nobody dared to touch him because he continued to be vicious to anyone other than the people in Magdalene's immediate circle, which really amounted to Sam, George, and very rarely Lily.

Magdalene was extremely careful to not leave any evidence that somebody else might find just lying around, so why did Sam pounce like a hungry vulture on a piece of paper that simply said she should wait for her in the dormitory attic? And why there, of all the possible and impossible places on campus? The dusty, never-used attic was quite a dangerous place which, as she'd heard Magdalene discuss during a faculty meeting, would undergo a massive renovation during the next school break. It was crammed with the archive that had been moved from the flooded basement, an assortment of old school furniture and who knows what else, and thoroughly uninviting to any kind of amorous assignation.

But despite absolutely all the clues pointing towards it, Sam did not see the danger coming. Either her loneliness had gotten the better of her, or her longing simply took precedence in her mind, clouding her reason. She'd whispered to Magdalene at dinner time that she'd see her in the attic at 10 PM and departed before the Headmistress

could answer her.

At a quarter to ten, Sam found herself climbing the stairs all the way to the roof, expecting to find the attic latched, only to be greeted by an open door and a single flower laying on the doorstep, inviting her in. Her heart almost burst out of her chest with the romance of it all. Magdalene had really gone up ahead of her and made sure Sam wouldn't be stranded in the attic waiting for her like a fool.

Still, as she entered the dark space she thanked her lucky stars she had grabbed her flashlight, because her attempts to turn on the overhead lights, such as they were, had only been partially successful. The switch did not respond right away to her flicking it up and down a couple of times, and just when she was set to abandon her attempts, a single frail lightbulb shone to life, but it was so weak and perilous, Sam decided to keep her flashlight close. To while away the time, she paced the narrow passageway of the long attic stacked with old files, leftover wallpaper and discarded furniture. Despite Orla's protestations that the attic was fine, Magdalene had not joked around during that meeting when she scoffed at how grimy and dangerous the place was. Moreover, the rains of the past few weeks must have damaged the roof, as the floor was wet in patches. Granted, people seldom came here exactly for those very reasons, even the girls who were housed just below in the dormitory.

She sensed more than heard the silent padding of Willoughby's paws, as he raced ahead of his mistress to give Sam his time-honored headbutt before surveying the scene around him with a disgusted look that mirrored Magdalene's perfectly. Still, he burrowed among some furniture, finding an old cushioned seat, and rolled into his customary loaf-like form.

Magdalene's face was a funny combination of elation mixed with a blatant desire to not be in the space she currently occupied. She gave Sam a quick kiss, leaned back, opened her mouth to say something undoubtedly haughty and displeased, thought better of it, and leaned back in for another kiss. This one lingered, moving like waves,

each deeper and more dangerous for Sam's fragile hold on her libido. When they parted, Sam was breathing heavily and all but cross-eyed. Magdalene smirked and reached out with her thumb to wipe her own lipstick off Sam's still panting mouth. Then she pecked Sam on the tip of her nose before looking around again with renewed, unadulterated disgust.

"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."

She tsked and 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. Suddenly Willoughby sprang to his feet and huddled close to Magdalene's ankles as the light shorted out and they were plunged into darkness, save for the single bright beam of the flashlight that Sam immediately turned on, shining in the dark and dust.

"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?" Magdalene brushed 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 the frightened cat with some difficulty because of his impressive bulk, settling him on her shoulder.

"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 tried not to shine the light directly at Magdalene, but even in the dim shadows, she could see astonishment cross the beloved angular

features, the eyes appearing massive in their bewilderment on the pale face.

“I didn’t leave you any notes, Sam. And you weretelling 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.”

Her heart hammered noisily in her chest with an unpleasant feeling of disquietude. Magdalene hadn’t left her the note. Magdalene wasn’t the one who’d summoned her to the attic.

Sam's, “But who...?” was interrupted by the slamming of the attic door in the distance, followed by a metal screech. Then the room fell into an eerie quiet, except for the crackling 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 suggestion, the electrical sound intensified, followed by loud hissing, and then Sam noticed an unmistakable scent.

“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. As they reached the door, Sam realized her flashlight had been rendered pointless. 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 everything up like kindling. With the fire set loose, the attic was

quickly turning into a raging inferno.

“Shit, push the door...”

“Samantha Threadneedle, what the hell do you think I’m doing?” Magdalene bumped her entire upper body into the door while holding on to Willoughby who was trying to escape her grasp. 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.

“The latch! Remember the massive latch we installed to keep the girls out?”

Yes, Sam remembered that latch and that lock, even 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 budge significantly. The noises Sam had heard before were probably the footsteps of whoever slammed and latched the door. They were locked in with the fire raging a few feet away. Sam could feel the acrid smell of melting plastic fill the air as Magdalene was trying to calm a terrified Willoughby. And how had Sam not seen this coming? This maneuver had all the complexity of a third-grader sending little notes to another kid pretending to be their sweetheart for laughs. Except none of this was a joke, with the attic quickly filling with smoke as the fire made quick work of the old shelves and crates.

Her breath was coming in short puffs, her claustrophobia rearing its head.

“Sam...” As if sensing Sam’s predicament, or maybe remembering it from New York’s elevator confession, Magdalene’s voice was absolutely calm, but Sam noticed her hands tremble slightly. Seeing the suppressed emotion made Sam grit her teeth and push through.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

“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 now much more sedate and scared Willoughby in her right arm, their shoulders hit the door with perfect synchronicity. Two tries and some pretty loud and inventive cursing from the Headmistress, and the hinges flew off the rotten frame, just as Sam had predicted. What she hadn't predicted was that the two of them would spill onto the floor, propelled by the force of their push and the splintering of the door. Still, bumps and bruises were preferable to the fire that was devouring everything in its path just a couple of feet behind them.

“You okay?” In the light of the blaze consuming the attic, Magdalene's eyes were made of ice, the anger in them raw and just as deadly. Sam nodded, grabbing the frightened Willoughby from Magdalene's arms and holding him tight to herself. “We have to get the children and the staff out.”

Before Sam could nod again, Magdalene grabbed her free hand and took off at a run. With one glance behind at the fire now consuming the roof and the floor, its breath scorching and terrifying, Sam, along with the cat, followed.

21

Of Raging Infernos & Gaining Agency

The attic was destroyed by the time Magdalene marshaled the faculty. The evacuation plan which, thank god, they had been practicing religiously since Magdalene had

taken over the school, had been executed without a hitch.

By the time the roof of the Sky Blue wing collapsed, Sam and Joanne had been double and triple counting the sleepy students hastily removed from the dormitories. In their pajamas, huddled under blankets in groups of twos and threes, the girls were squinting at the raging inferno that was now consuming their classrooms.

“250 with faculty, Sam.” Joanne’s face was streaked with soot and her eyes were frightened, but she had held up like a seasoned firefighter under all the pressure. So her announcement that two people were missing gave Sam pause.

“I counted 252. Guess one of us is wrong?” Heart pounding, Sam looked into Joanne’s determined eyes and knew the older woman was dead certain of her count. Well, shit. They counted again, and by the time they met at the end of the throng of students and faculty, Sam was indeed proven wrong. 250, specifically one resident of the dormitories was missing as well as one faculty member.

She ran, literal inferno at her back, to where Magdalene was speaking with the volunteer firefighters from town. By their resolute but somewhat dejected faces, Sam knew what pretty much everyone else on the grounds could surmise. There was no saving the school. The adjacent structures, maybe. Perhaps those that weren’t too close to the building spewing fire, and those that weren’t susceptible to the ocean breeze carrying embers their way. But the Main Hall with the dormitory wings was kindling. The nature and age of the materials, the quick spread of the fire in the strong winds, and the only rudimentary firefighting equipment that could be pulled up the cliffs to the school, had all virtually signed the death warrant for the centuries-old edifice.

Still, if she knew Magdalene at all, and how much the school meant to her, how much her dream of what the school could be fueled her, she would not give up without a fight to at least salvage something. But the missing student and teacher took

precedence.

“We’re missing two! Headmistress, Mr. Robson! We’re missing two—” Even as she shouted it above the roar of the fire, above the scared chatter of the crowd of girls huddled together and the teachers calling out their names to ensure they were all there, Sam heard a ragged call full of desperation.

“Amanda! Amanda!” Lily, in sooty sweats and a hoodie Sam knew for a fact was Amanda’s, 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!”

Like a woman possessed, Magdalene 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 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.”

In the burning light of the condemned school, Magdalene stood like a doomed angel, shoulders set, eyes dark.

“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 taut as a whip, she stared him down.

“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 fear and obvious frustration at the words of the Fire Chief seemed to cut through the noise and then she was off into the burning building.

“Lily, stop! Lily!” But all the shouting was for nothing, and Sam watched with terror as the girl disappeared through the massive oaken doors thrown open by the earlier exodus.

“Make that two minors, Robson.” Madalene did not even wait for him to shake his head mournfully. “If you’re not helping, Robson, you’re in my way. Get out of it.” Shrugging off her blazer, Magdalene took off in the direction of the burning school, overtaking Sam, who had taken off after Lily.

“Jesus, Magdalene!” Sam barely managed to catch up to her again as the Headmistress ran down the hallway, straight towards the old staircase leading to the first floor.

“Well, isn’t this just swell.” Sam, who was the younger and supposedly fitter of the two, for all the good that running did for her, lagged behind, desperately trying to catch her breath without inhaling too much smoke. By the time Sam reached Magdalene, she was standing in the middle of a smoke-filled corridor, seemingly lost. In the dark, with only the fire from above casting an eerie glow and the burning wing across from them illuminating the sky, it was difficult to determine which way they should go next.

“Sam, I can’t...”

Determination, desperation, fear, all passed in quick succession on Magdalene's face, and Sam knew she'd follow this woman to the end of the world.

"Magdalene..." Sam was cut short by a pleading look.

"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."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

“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.”

The pleading look turned into a glare on a dime.

“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, 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. The whole building was moaning like a wounded animal and Sam, who had raged at this very entity standing in the way of her happiness, for being the priority in Magdalene’s life just yesterday, felt her heart ache for the old girl.

Several long minutes of wandering in smoke and darkness and Sam was coming to understand that neither her memory nor the handkerchiefs—that Magdalene had produced from somewhere—hastily tied around their mouths were of much use. They were lost and it was getting harder and harder to breathe.

“Get on your knees!” Magdalene pulled on her arm and Sam—despite the horrible circumstances—wanted to crack a joke, especially when she saw the way Magdalene’s eyes went wide, realizing what she had just said.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Sam...” The long-suffering sigh was interrupted by coughing and Sam decided to roll the dice and picked a direction. Just as she was about to start crawling, a small voice and coughing from the opposite side drew her 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 by the long line of faculty offices. Sam felt relief flood her system, they were not lost after all. And Lily, the stubborn little troublemaker, was okay. More than okay, the girl had probably saved Sam and Magdalene’s behinds, since Sam had been about to lead them 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, Sam knew they’d better get out fast before the smoke did all of them in. She was about to say as much when she felt more than saw a familiar macrame wall hanging. For once, she was thankful Orla had never quite gotten over the 70s. The knotted monstrosity had decorated the entrance to every office the former headmistress had inhabited for as long as Sam could remember. In the smoke and dark, Sam knew that they were extremely lucky to have found it.

Fumbling with the handle, the door opened laboriously into a dark room with the fire that was tearing down the adjacent wing illuminating the space through the window and revealing a silhouette sleeping 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’s voice was warm, gentle, and so calm. She might’ve been discussing Sunday morning brunch.

“Amanda, where is Professor Fenway?” Peering around herself, Sam was fairly certain there was nobody else in the office. 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 for the last time, Sam had to get at least some facts on the situation before they got the hell out of Dodge. “Has she been here with you at all?” Another shake of the disheveled, blonde head and more coughing. Definitely time to get out.

“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 stepped into the hallway it became abundantly clear that the visibility had decreased even more and they would probably get lost within seconds.

“Sam, do you think you can get us out of here?” Magdalene’s voice, while determined and resolute, held a slight note of fear. As Sam was about to answer that she’d do her best, though she could not guarantee any results since they were as good as blind, she was interrupted by high-pitched meowing.

“Oh my god, Willoughby!”

Sam laughed in spite of the situation 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 crouched figure, circling in place as if hurrying them up, clearly determined to show them the way in the smoke.

They made their way down the same pathway they had crawled through 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. The noise, the rage of the fire, felt like Dragons was screaming around them, wounded, tortured, dying. Sam knew that the tears streaming down her face were not all from the smoke and ash. Her heart was just as wounded, for this building that was getting more and more decimated by the second.

In hindsight, perhaps she should have saved her sympathy because a second was all it took. She was already almost on the ground floor when she heard the treacherous sounds—the low moan of the wood reaching its stress point. In one breath she pushed Lily and Amanda ahead of herself—into the safety of where Magdalene had been, anxiously trying and failing to grab a reticent Willoughby—away from the danger and away from whatever would come next.

When that next did come, Sam did not have a chance to feel it. A section of the staircase above her caved in, the old wood no match for the fire as the banister came crashing down, burying her beneath the debris.

* * *

Later she'd say she was probably in and out of it since she could remember only bits and pieces. Mostly she recalled being under something heavy and her head hurting a lot, but still struggling to reach for Willoughby, whom she could hear meowing just inches away. Later still, Joanne would tell her that, when the volunteer firefighters started to remove the chunks of wood, hastily summoned by a hysterical Magdalene—who was tearing at the rubble underneath which Sam was buried with

her bare hands—found Sam curled protectively around the cat who was hissing at anyone who dared approach them. So that part wasn't new at all. Willoughby had been true to himself. Still, despite a hurting head, Sam had kept mumbling throughout her rescue that the cat would be having tuna a lot, once she was back on her feet.

She'd also kept trying to open her eyes, but it felt like her face was covered in something wet and sticky. When it had proven too difficult, Sam remembered resorting to simply calling Magdalene's name. It felt important to say it, to hear it, to hope that she was okay, that she'd indeed been too far from the falling staircase, and that she'd gotten Lily and Amanda out.

She could occasionally feel someone's cool hand on her face, trying to wipe away the wet and the sticky. When she was finally able to open one eye, she could tell she was on the ground, Magdalene kneeling over her, her face covered in grime, with tear tracks in sharp relief on pale, dirty cheeks. And her hands were bloody. Sam opened her mouth again only to be shushed.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

“I’m fine, it’s your blood. A part of the staircase collapsed, Sam.” Magdalene’s head bobbed and a sob escaped. “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 keep another sob from escaping.

“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?”

“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.”

“Don’t lie to that girl now, Headmistress. Half that blood is yours since you tore the skin off your hands trying to get to her.” Joanne’s voice was hoarse and her face solemn with worry. “And you, missy, have a ton of explaining to do. Thought I’d lost you, you stubborn idiot.” And now there were two women crying over Sam, and her body wisely decided that, instead of staying awake for the scolding, she’d do well to pass out again, which she promptly did.

* * *

She woke next when the town doctor, in a rumpled shirt, lifted her eyelid and pointed a light in her eye.

“Cut it out, Franz!”

“Yeah, I think she might be concussed, but not too seriously, and I do not fear brain damage. She’s clearly lucid enough to want to tell me to fuck off, but holding back because there are children present.”

“Hey, don’t talk smack about my teacher.” Lily sounded remarkably cheerful all things considered, and when her face appeared in Sam’s line of vision, she had to smile. The mischievous grin was back on the grimy face. “You have a hard head there, teach!”

“I wouldn’t be speaking so loudly, if I were you, Lils. In fact, I’d be nowhere near me when I get my strength back, young lady. You have a lecture coming, your ears will fall off. Running into a burning building?”

Lily’s smile was gone now and fresh tears sprang up. Instantly Sam felt like shit.

“Hey, hey, come here.” When Lily came closer, still sniffing and trying to wipe her face with the long sleeve of her hoodie, Sam just grabbed her by the thin shoulders and held her tight.

“You beautiful, beautiful kiddo. How is that for agency? Saving the day? Saving your girl, saving both the Headmistress and myself in there? You did good, you reckless fool, but if you do it again, I swear...”

They hugged for a long while until Lily’s tears subsided, and the girl left Sam to go and find Amanda with promises to be back soon.

A voice from behind Sam that sounded remarkably like Alden demanded that Sam be airlifted to Boston for further diagnosis and treatment, and Sam felt her hand being squeezed gently. Magdalene’s fingers were intertwined with hers, holding on

tenderly, as if telling her she'd be safe, that she would be protected, that she wouldn't be let go of. Sam chose the easy way out and closed her eyes, instead of arguing with whomever it was. She thought she might have a bigger concussion than that asshole Franz was implying since there was no way Alden was on the island in the middle of the night. Then sleep claimed her.

* * *

Sam woke for the third time with a slight breeze on her face and a blanket being pulled tighter over her, as dawn broke over Dragons. She knew right away that her face was clean, as Magdalene's fingers traveled freely over her features, unencumbered by blood or soot or grime. It felt like heaven to feel those cool, gentle fingertips tracing the contours of her face, her cheekbones, her nose, her brows, her forehead.

"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."

"Has he checked you out? You were just as exposed as everyone else." At Magdalene's eye roll, 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 sat up and marveled that it was much easier than she’d expected. She had some small nicks on her hands and arms, and she could tell she might have bruises on her legs as well, but aside from the mother of all headaches, she felt remarkably fine.

“Why was he right, darling?” Magdalene moved to assist her and wrap the blanket around her shoulders. She was still pale, but her eyes had lost the deathly fear they had held when Sam had awoken the first time.

“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, watching as the sun rose majestically over the ocean, slowly illuminating the surrounding destruction. She knew she only had to turn her head to see the school’s ruins behind them. She had no doubts she’d see not only the carnage of the Main Hall, but the dormitory wings had probably burned to the ground as well. However, she wasn’t ready to face it. Not yet anyway. So she looked at the rising sun, although it hurt her eyes, and she listened to Magdalene’s breathing next to her, despite knowing that she had no business being this close to her, or touching Sam’s face or hugging her shoulders, tucking her in the blanket more snugly.

“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?”

Magdalene just peered into the sunrise, and her lips thinned.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

“What’s weird is that Orla is still missing.”

“Do you think she’s...” Sam couldn’t bear to say the words.

“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.”

With the potential of this revelation being too alarming, and the possible implications far-reaching for Sam, she set it aside for the moment and focused on more pressing matters.

“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.” She only cuddled Sam closer and turned her face into the warm rays of the sun.

Sam lost her thought for a second, mesmerized by how the light fell on the sharp planes of this face, the most beautiful face she had ever seen. Expressive eyes, the cheekbones that could cut glass, and the full lips, that could be mischievous and daring and demanding. How was she supposed to survive the rest of their year apart without simply leaning in every time she chose and closing the distance between them to claim those lips, to touch those faint lines on the corners of the eyes that were currently more amber than blue in the timid sun of the morning? But with Magdalene behaving like she was the one concussed, Sam knew she had to be strong for both of them.

“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 the throbbing temple, instantly making Sam lose her breath.

They sat in silence for a bit, Magdalene’s fingers tracing patterns under the blanket on Sam’s back as if she couldn’t help but touch her. Which was all fine and good and certainly something that Sam never wanted her to stop doing either, but the weight of responsibility, as always, sat heavy on her shoulders. And if Magdalene was traumatized by recent events and suddenly confused or acting recklessly, it was time for Sam to step in and prevent something that Magdalene would surely regret until the end of her days.

“You should care, though,” Sam repeated and tried to pull away, only to be held even closer. Magdalene just sat there, still looking at the dawn and said nothing this time.

“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 Sam almost gasped at how big and tumultuous the eyes were as they watched her still in silence. “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 had no idea what she’d expected to happen next, but Magdalene making Sam’s earlier wish come true by leaning in and kissing her firmly on the mouth wasn’t it. They were in full view of the whole school and possibly a trustee, people milling all around them...

“Sam Threadneedle, have you been reading lesbian romance, you adorable lunatic?” She ran a fingertip over Sam’s lips, causing a warm, dizzy feeling to overtake her.

“That is not the point, and also stop looking at me like that!” Magdalene just raised her perfectly groomed eyebrow but Sam barreled onward, desperate to stop 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 kept looking at her, and now the eyes were warm, full of affection and something deeper, bigger, and just a touch scarier for how much determination they contained.

“I do love the school. I love you more.” There was a roar in Sam’s ears, which she didn’t think was in any way associated with her concussion. Was this how it felt when you finally received the one thing you wanted more than anything else in the world? Was this how other children had felt on Christmas mornings? Magdalene must’ve sensed Sam’s tumult, for she leaned in and gave her a sweet peck on her nose before continuing.

“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.”

And then, after making Sam the happiest person in the world with a handful of words

and another tender application of lips to the temple where bandages held swollen torn skin, Magdalene opened her arms and held Sam to her chest, threading pieces of Sam's heart together and holding it tightly. Wanted, loved, needed. Cherished. Sam breathed in and inhaled the fall air with just a hint of jasmine as the sun rose majestically over the ocean.

22

Of Changed Circumstances & Major Revelations

“When you said circumstances have changed yesterday, what did you mean exactly?”

Sitting on the examination table in Franz's small clinic, getting the blasted penlight in her eyes again, Sam tried to distract herself as best she could. With Magdalene hovering a foot away and glowering at Franz every time Sam as much as made a pained peep, it was easier to attempt to divert both of their nervous energy in another direction.

“Are you finished here, Doctor Franz?” Magdalene gave the doctor a scathing look.

“Ms. Nox, this is technically my clinic—” A perfectly manicured auburn eyebrow rose elegantly, and the doctor scurried away.

“Huh. He is one of the most irreverent men I know. Hates everyone, listens to no one. What the hell happened while I was out cold? He is legit scared of you.” Sam reached out and intertwined their fingers.

“He should be. I made him do his job.” At Sam's uncomprehending stare, she sighed. “I pretty much told him to document all your injuries and be ready to make a statement to the police to their extent. He's the island's official medical examiner, though I suspect the last time he performed his duties was when he certified the death

of the elderly Mrs. Hatchins three years ago. He's honestly not a bad doctor and the stitches on your temple say as much. He did an acceptable job, but he is an irredeemable asshole when it comes to everything else."

"Wait. Police?" The fingers around Sam's tightened, and the already tense face turned to stone.

"Sam, you were locked in the attic and it was set on fire. You think I won't get the police, the FBI, the fucking National Guard involved?" The grip turned painful for a second before Magdalene relaxed her fingers. However, her shoulders were rigid, and her jaw muscles worked as she ground her teeth. Before the repercussions of what had just been revealed to Sam could hit her, Magdalene's beauty did instead. As always it reached its target with deadly precision, and as always it took Sam's breath away. Idiot, Sam thought. I'm a complete idiot for her.

"The National Guard isn't an investigating body."

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

Magdalene actually growled, and Sam bit her lip trying to hide a stupidly smitten grin.

“You were locked in there with me, by the way. Are you sure I was the intended victim? We’ve been down this road before. And the attacks have been targeting you.”

“Sam, the fact that I was with you is pure coincidence. If you hadn’t told me you’d be in the attic, I would have had no reason to go there. You’d have been all alone in the fire. And who the hell knows if you would have had the strength to break down that door by yourself.”

Sam considered Magdalene’s words, but it still felt surreal somehow. However, it was what came next that she was absolutely unprepared for.

“Orla will be picked up as soon as she’s been located.”

“What?” Her face probably showed the shock she was feeling.

Her lover paced away from the bed, and despite her total astonishment and the sheer awfulness of the news, Sam couldn’t help but realize how strangely uncomfortable Magdalene seemed with the conversation.

“Orla was supposed to be with Amanda. She never showed, and several people saw her running towards town and away from the school around the same time you and I found ourselves locked in the attic. She’s currently missing.”

“But—”

“No buts, Sam, she threatened you just a few weeks ago. George overheard her telling you to think twice before going up against her. Just weeks ago. I could kill her myself. You are sitting here with a split temple and burns on your shoulders. You could have died, you hear me, you could have died, and for what? To oust me from the school? To continue a ridiculous vendetta against me and my reforms and my efforts to keep the fucking school alive? I’m not even going to delve into how absolutely everyone at the school was in danger. What if we hadn’t been successful with the evacuation? What if...” By the time she stopped speaking, her face was an amalgam of anger and fear.

“Come here.”

“Sam, don’t patronize me.”

“Come here. I need you to hold me.”

Magdalene’s shoulders finally slumped, and she went into Sam’s open embrace, sighing as she burrowed in. She was shaking faintly.

“You don’t play fair, darling. You could have been killed because of me.”

“Shhh. Just hold on to me.” Sam ran her hands up and down the slim shoulder blades, like delicate wings, thinking how fragile Magdalene was. How easily hurt, how lucky they both were to have escaped with only bumps and bruises. But she couldn’t muster any anger. Just grief.

If what Magdalene was telling her was true, Orla—her mentor and her friend—tried to kill her because she dared to pick the opposite side? Yes, their last encounter had been beyond acrimonious, but this was going way too far. It made absolutely no sense. Yes, Magdalene had presented her with a very compelling case against her former headmistress, but something kept tugging at Sam’s consciousness, a loose

thread she felt if she could only manage to unravel, she'd find the answers she was looking for. Answers they all were looking for.

"I'm sorry."

The whispered apology from Magdalene was so unexpected, Sam thought she'd hallucinated it, but the fingers that curled around her neck stopped playing with the strands of hair that had gotten out of her braid, and Sam knew she had heard right.

"What for?"

Eyes more blue than amber looked at her with barely concealed pain.

"I know what she means to you. Both her and Joanne. They raised you, it's very difficult to believe..."

"Sweetheart, let's not go there. I have my doubts, and I don't want to waste our time together arguing about whether a woman who was like a mother to me wanted to burn me alive." It sounded clinical and forced even to her own ears, and Magdalene's incredulous stare seemed to confirm as much, but Sam could not allow herself to go there, could not yet fully process what had happened and how it all could have been caused by Orla.

Magdalene caressed her cheek and thankfully decided to move on to other subjects.

"Of course, there's no need to hash this out now. We have all the time in the world, Sam."

That old chestnut. Magdalene and her stubborn insistence that they could now be out and in the open. Sam wanted to throw something.

“Okay, explain to me how Orla’s alleged assassination attempt changes your situation at the school?”

“Oh Sam, you care too much about too many, and least of all about yourself. Darling, first of all, there is not much left of the school. The Main Hall, half the quad, and all three dormitories are kindling. We are sending the girls away, some are still waiting for their parents to come to pick them up, but the majority are going home, and we will work to find them placements at other schools in the area. From where I stand—and Joanne agrees with me—the old dormitory by the chapel that we were setting up for the Science labs and guest faculty can house up to twenty seniors and we can teach them there as well, if they choose to remain. But mostly this year, and maybe even the next, the school will either find the funds to rebuild or close its doors forever. So for what it’s worth, and many many other things aside, you worry for nothing. I’m not giving up my career for you.”

“And she won’t have to if I have my say.”

Alden’s voice, simultaneous with a quick knock on the door, jolted Sam out of Magdalene’s embrace. But before she could push the Headmistress away and somehow still save everyone’s face and continue the pretense of them being nothing but colleagues, Magdalene simply held her closer and said, “Come in, Stanton.”

“Thank you, Magdalene.”

Sam felt a bit of whiplash watching two people who had had nothing but contempt for each other just weeks ago now be on a first name basis and act like buddies.

“Magdalene, could I ask you to...” Alden sheepishly motioned with his chin as though saying the words ‘Headmistress, please vacate the room’ would pain him.

“If she wants to speak with you, certainly. Sam?” The protectiveness was touching, but Sam was still very much confused.

“Yeah, sure.”

Magdalene gave her shoulders one last squeeze and whispered, “I’ll be right outside,” before stepping out with a long, thoughtful look at Alden.

The man himself took a deep breath and opened his mouth to say something, before closing it again, reconsidering whatever it was he had been about to say and walking to the window and then turning back to Sam. Reminiscent of their discussion in her classroom, he paced the length of the small space, like an old, sickly, caged animal, and with every turn he took, Sam was getting more weirded out by the situation. They had to stop having conversations like these, Sam thought. They inevitably upset both of them. Finally, the silence stretched past a level Sam was even remotely comfortable with.

“Mr. Alden, is there anything I can do for you?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know, Samantha. I just don’t know where to start. Perhaps with a ‘forgive me’?”

The day was just getting stranger and stranger.

“I’m sorry?”

“No, I am. So very sorry, Samantha. I am.” Alden stopped pacing and was looking at Sam with watery, pleading eyes.

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m bungling this, aren’t I?”

Sam simply nodded, and he turned away from her, once again staring silently out the window. Finally, he drew another long breath and spoke.

“They picked up Orla Fenway fifteen minutes ago at Joel Tullinger’s mansion in Marblehead. She traveled there on a private boat owned by one of the townspeople to inform him about Magdalene’s affair with you.”

Sam’s jaw dropped, but Alden simply shrugged, and the hairs on the nape of her neck suddenly rose, on alert. Something was happening, something important, and she kept being left in the dust by her intellect, if not by her own intuition.

“You don’t have to be afraid, Samantha. I will not allow anything to happen to you or to her. And if Joel tries, I will simply surrender my authority as trustee to my last heir and retire early. As such, my heir will have as much say on the Board as Joel—as any trustee—and thus the present conflict of interest will become moot.”

The feeling of intense confusion, but also premonition, intensified. And as Alden

shrugged his shoulder again and raised his pale grey eyes to her once more, Sam's heart simply stopped. Her mouth was so dry, she had difficulty swallowing, otherwise she was fairly certain her gulp would've been audible.

"Your last heir..."

"My daughter, Samantha. You."

They looked at each other then, and not for the first time, Sam felt that she had probably been one hell of a fool all these years. No, they didn't look even remotely alike. Nothing but the eyes, and his had gotten paler with age, losing their sparkle and the sharpness of the grey that hers still held. But that gesture, that shrug, was something she knew all too well. It was her own. Should she have seen it all along? That her absentee guardian was her missing-in-action father?

"I don't know what to say." In fact, Sam thought, she was fucking lying through her teeth just then, because she had way too many things to say.

"You don't have questions?" Alden stood stiff and still, as if a convicted prisoner being escorted to the scaffold for his execution. He was hanging on her every gesture, every breath. Waiting, waiting, waiting... Was he waiting for her to embrace him? To curse him out? Both were equally possible outcomes, but instead, Sam felt something deflate inside her. Just shrivel and lay down, tired, spent, apathetic. What a totally flat apotheosis to her life's drama.

She had searched for her father her whole life. The records on her mother were so scant. An orphan herself, Amelia Threadneedle had not left much of a trail in the world. Foster homes, menial jobs, a waitress on the island at Rowena's pub. Nobody knew her well, nobody had any idea who Sam's father was, and she had simply been brought to Dragons and left there after her mother died during childbirth. A small tote held a note with her name, Samantha Anne Threadneedle, and her mother's meager

possessions, such as they were.

And now it turned out her father had been around her whole life. When she'd been scared at night. When she had nobody to hold her when she was sick and Joanne and Orla were too busy with the other girls. When she cried herself to sleep after being thrown out of Tullinger's Christmas party. This man had escorted her home and left her alone in the massive, empty dormitory for the holidays.

It dawned on her that, in his earlier proclamation about how he'd make everything all right, he had given away a pretty big tell. She was his last heir. As she had recently found out, in the past several years, he had lost his three sons, one after another. Her brothers. Accidents and disease had taken them all. And, Sam realized, she had also been robbed of knowing them. Knowing people who could have been her family, if they had only been given a chance.

And yet here Stanton Alden was, suddenly concerned about the perpetuation of his illustrious line. How simple. How sad. How pathetic. Still, questions started bubbling up in her mind, and soon her stupor gave way to a feeling of deep disgust.

"Thirty years ago you threw a kid out of Dragons. You told everyone it was for her being illegitimate, and yet you had yourself abastardjust the same? How positively rich and white of you, Mr. Alden."

"Ah, that's not exactly what happened, Samantha. But yes. We referred Ms. Nox to another school for breach of the school admission policy and concealing her family status. When the teachers protested, Freddy Tullinger—knowing about my impending predicament—thought that it was time to abolish the antiquated rule about all Dragons students being of legitimate birth from the charter."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

“How handy that you could use that to place your own daughter at Dragons.”

“The school used to have a nursery at the time. I was told the care was good.”

He said it as if it was some kind of defense. As if leaving his daughter on the school’s doorstep was okay because at the time Dragons had a tiny nursery, which was later phased out in order to further distance themselves from the townsfolk.

“It wasn’t easy to make the Board change the charter. In fact, the old trustees were so entrenched in their conservative ideals, they’d have fought me tooth and nail. You think Reverend Sanderson was a hard man? The men on the Board thirty years ago were bastions of conservatism, pillars of the community, determined to never allow the new-fangled ways into Dragons. But as it always goes, and I’m but one example, the bastions and the pillars have secrets they never want to come out. I know I didn’t. But I also didn’t want my child to be a pariah. And so Freddy and I persuaded every single one of the trustees, with their affairs, with their gambling and their corruption. They themselves had long lists of transgressions, and so they agreed to change the charter. I pushed for Orla Fenway to be hired after that. I knew she’d usher in even more reforms, and you’d be well at the school. I couldn’t be with you, but I wanted you safe, Samantha.”

His eyes filled with tears then, and he looked down on his left hand where the wedding band hung loose on his ring finger.

“I had a wife and children. I was running for State Legislature. Thirty years ago, the scandal would have killed my political aspirations.”

“Wasn’t I one of those children? And how did those aspirations work out for you? You’re seventy and you’re still running for office. A lot of good all your machinations did you.”

Alden visibly flinched, but Sam was past the point of caring. She wanted to pace, to hurl things at him, to hurt him the same way he had hurt her. Instead, she looked him dead in the eye and went on.

“I know that being illegitimate wasn’t why you dismissed Magdalene from school. You just used that as an excuse, because it was the one thing in the charter that her transgressions fit under. She kissed another girl. You caught her and your homophobic self couldn’t cope with it! Well, look at you now, come crawling to your only daughter, who is very, very queer. How does it feel? God works in such ironic ways, don’t you think?”

The words tasted bitter on her tongue, and she expected him to not stand for them, but he simply stared at her with those damned, watery grey eyes.

“I lost everything, Samantha. In a matter of years, I lost everything, everyone. You are all I have left, and I had no idea how to tell you. My eldest, Edward, passed away a year ago, and I kept thinking that I needed to tell you, that I needed to reach out to you, because otherwise all I have worked for, all I’ve done in my life, it’s all for naught. But I was scared you’d reject me.”

“You were right to be scared. What, is it suddenly okay that I’m a lesbian?”

“Sam...” The look of naked misery on his face did nothing to soothe her. She had waited for this moment all her life, to meet her father. Now here it was, and the man had turned out to be a selfish asshole. She remembered how, when she was a child, Joanne used to tell her fairy tales about princesses who were lost and then found by their parents, and then they all lived happily ever after. Some fairy tale this was

turning out to be.

“You decide to tell me you are my father only after all your other family members have passed away. And now, because there is nobody else, it makes me just good enough. Simply by virtue of me being the last one standing. I don’t know how you expect me to take your confession.”

She shrugged her shoulder, then stopped mid-gesture, consciously lowering the offending body part. Alden was staring at her with so much longing, clearly having observed the shrug, recognizing it for what it was, for the red line that connected them, made them similar when barely anything else did.

“This is just like what you did to Magdalene. You threw her out for being gay, and then when she was ‘respectable’ in your eyes, having been married not just to a man, but to a man of influence and power, you suddenly could make use of her. Irony has been left in the dirt here, Mr. Alden. It’s not even funny. It would be tragic if it wasn’t such blatant hypocrisy.”

“I’m sorry, Samantha. This past year has been agony for me. Wanting to tell you and being afraid you’d want nothing to do with me. Wanting to shield you from all the things that kept happening at the school, from all the danger and then not being here for you when it mattered most - when the school was on fire—”

“I didn’t need you here when the school was on fire! I needed you here when I was five and sick with chickenpox. I needed you here when I was eleven and beaten by an older town kid for no reason at all. I needed you here at thirteen when some asshole threw me out of his Christmas party because I dared to clock his even bigger asshole of a kid for calling me a ‘dirty orphan’. I didn’t need you here last night. I had other people who were here for me.”

Alden’s hands tightened on the bed frame, and he exhaled on a sob.

“You could have died, Samantha. If not for Magdalene, you could have died. I saw her hands, I saw how she dug in the rubble until she found you.”

“You were on the island that early?”

“I ordered the boat the moment I found out that the school was burning. It was still early then, I got in just as they were looking for you in the pile of debris under the staircase.”

“Well, for once, you were present for all the action then.”

“You’re right. Of course, you’re right.” He nodded shakily like a marionette with a torn string. “I can’t change anything about the past. But know this, I will do anything, anything you need to save the school. To save Magdalene. To save you.”

Sam wanted to laugh. Cry too, but mostly laugh. And so she did. She threw her head back and let out a peal of laughter. If it sounded a touch hysterical, she didn’t care.

“God, I’ve waited thirty years for my dad to come and save me. You know I spent countless nights all alone in that little room they set up for me out of the transformed closet, in the faculty dormitory next to Joanne’s room, and prayed to God for my daddy to find me. I went to church like a good little girl and prayed. Reverend Sanderson said all prayers come true if your heart is true. I thought something must have been very wrong with mine since my one and only prayer was never answered. And then I fucking stopped praying because what kind of cruel prick tells a five-year-old kid that, if her prayer for a father isn’t being answered, it’s because her heart isn’t true?”

Tears were streaming down Alden’s blotchy face freely now, and he made no attempt to stop them. He was an ugly crier, and Sam had a silly thought that she was grateful to genetics for not inheriting that from him.

“I’m sorry, Samantha.”

“Yeah, you kinda are sorry. And pathetic. You’re here to do what now? Save the day? Make sure Joel and the other trustees don’t throw Magdalene out? Hell, you already did once, and then you almost did it again this very summer. If I hadn’t yelled at you—”

“I thought she was putting you in danger! I was concerned that she wasn’t ready for the amount of responsibility and authority placed on her shoulders, that she wasn’t prepared, Sam, that she’d put the school at risk. I was so worried for you.” His voice was hoarse, and his hands were trembling. His face was turning more crimson by the minute, and suddenly Sam had another thought.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

“What the hell could she have been prepared for when none of this could have been foreseen? It really is very difficult to get ready for the things you don’t see coming, Mr. Alden.”

A stray thought occurred to her as she was speaking. She still had no idea what to call this man. The appellation she was using was familiar, a security blanket against the dangers of the truth, that he wasn’t just a Mister to her anymore. But the fact that he had always been present in her life, but removed enough to require her to address him with the title ‘Mister’ burned like acid, and she knew she’d bite her tongue off before she called him anything else.

She panted, the words rolled off her tongue, and utterly exhausted her with each and every sound that left her lips. Her temper had gotten the better of her once again, but it had also completely wiped her out.

“You waited a year. Yet you started showing up a lot more three months ago...”

He smiled at her through his tears, and that smile had so much pride, Sam wanted to turn away from it. Or maybe slap him. Because he had no right to be proud of her. No right at all.

“I always told Tullinger you were too smart by far, Sam. Too smart. I had a heart attack six months ago. Screwed up my campaign schedule. But also gave me a bit of a different perspective. My boys are gone, my wife is gone. Your mother is gone. You are all that I have left. I’m an old man, my heart is weak, my life is ending, and I am all alone. You are all I have.”

Sam shook her head and slowly got off the examination table. God, of all the stupid places to have this conversation, they had to have it at Franz's clinic, where the whole waiting room had probably heard them. What was it with this island that you just couldn't get any privacy anywhere?

"Samantha, wait—"

"Yeah, we are done with this conversation, Mr. Alden. I have no idea what you expect of me."

"Then tell me what you expect of me! Please." This was perhaps the one correct thing he'd said since he'd opened his mouth today.

"You said you'd help? You'd make sure Magdalene remains Headmistress?"

"Yes." His voice was unwavering this time. As if he had absolute assuredness that he'd make it happen. Who knew, maybe his dogged determination could withstand the self-righteous storm of complete awfulness Joel would unleash on them all.

"And the school?"

"Sam, I'm an extremely wealthy man. And if my millions don't suffice, believe me, there are people who owe me, the former Governor of Massachusetts, a favor or two."

"Funny how you were ready to let the school shrivel up and die just a few months ago, with the endowment being almost bankrupt. And suddenly there you are, so adamant to save the very institution you damn near ruined."

"I don't care about the school, Samantha. Not even a little. It was a chore my father thrust on me in his will, and his father had passed on to him in his. But if helping the

school will make you stop looking at me like you hate me, I'll do anything to make that happen."

Well, this was something at least. He was a selfish man, Sam thought as she opened the door without looking back and stepped into the crowded waiting room where Magdalene sat, graceful as ever on a beat-up chair. But even selfish men had their uses. And they needed both his influence and his funds like never before right now.

23

Of Burned Fingertips & Hero Felines Yet Again

With only ten of the twenty seniors choosing to spend the year at the makeshift version of Dragons, and thus requiring less faculty, the renovated facility easily held the twenty-something people who were staying and persevering amongst the chaos of the burnt-out Main Hall. The grounds were strewn with debris and torn apart by the construction crews that had descended upon it in the past week.

The logistics for the remaining people were quickly set in motion, and Magdalene was dedicating her days and sometimes her nights to try and find places for the girls who were now home with their parents and for the faculty who were not needed for the seniors still at Dragons.

Sam had taken Doctor Franz's strict orders to heart and stayed in bed. Whatever miracle had been at work that had allowed her to walk away from a collapsed wooden staircase with only minor scrapes, she knew she was extremely lucky. They all were. The stitched bump on her head, the skin off Magdalene's hands, and the tip of Willoughby's tail were the extent of the injuries. Even Lily and Amanda had gotten off without any lasting damage from the smoke inhalation and were currently decorating their new rooms with things their parents had sent them from home.

Lily had pretty much been glued to Sam's side the first couple of days after the fire, leaving Sam's new quarters only to get some sleep, and even then protesting loudly that she would make do with the chair in the corner. Sam initially didn't have the heart to send her away. The girl had been through a traumatic experience, and yet here she was, caring for Sam. It never ceased to amaze her how big Lily's heart was. Big enough to encase the world.

She would have made good on her proposal to sleep in the corner too, watching over Sam at night, if it wasn't for Magdalene coming in late, tired and obviously surprised to find Lily curled up on the chair, reading *The Light Princess* out loud to a mostly dozing Sam.

"Just saying, 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."

"Lils, with all due respect, you and Amanda are totally princesses, but you are so not my princesses."

"Well, duh! Cause Hottie McHot—"

"That's Headmistress McHot to you, Ms. Easterly." Magdalene's soft quiet voice held a note of amusement, but both Lily and Sam jumped about a foot in the air at the interruption.

"Ah, what are you doing here, Headmistress?" Sam tried to play it cool. Yes, they'd agreed that they would no longer hold back, would no longer pretend, but Sam was still rather cautious about not giving away too much in front of people. Everything was still so new, so fragile.

"I'm here to retire for the night, darling. Any objections?" Clearly, Magdalene had no

such compulsion for caution. Which was par for the course. Once this woman made a decision, she was all in, damn the torpedoes.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

Lily watched the moment with wide eyes, then rose to extend a high five to Sam, who 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?”

However, Lily was no longer easily cowed, no matter how imposing the Headmistress looked. And Magdalene had an undeniable talent to fill the room. Her presence alone put people on notice, and notice they did. Everywhere she went, she was the absolute star of the show, the center of attention, and the main attraction of every gathering. It would have been disconcerting if Sam hadn’t been as proud, as awed and as in love as she was. How did she get this lucky? But she was definitely that. Because here stood a woman who owned every room she had ever entered, and yet she’d chosen to enter Sam’s. To announce loud and proud that she’d be spending the night with the nerdy, injured math teacher. How ridiculous. How wondrous.

Her line of overawed thoughts was interrupted by laughter, and now both Magdalene and Lily were giggling, delighting a confused and rather stunned Sam.

“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 lesfic 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 laughed at the girl’s antics.

“I plead the fifth.”

Her cheekbones and the bridge of her nose were covered in a dusting of freckles that were normally hidden behind her pristine makeup, and Sam felt her treacherous heart stutter in her chest. She knew she was staring, knew she was being ridiculous, but she couldn’t seem to help herself.

“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 knew 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.

“Are you sexually frustrated, darling?”

Well, when Magdalene employed that particular tone, the lower octave, part gravel, part bourbon, all sex, Sam was a total goner.

“That should be illegal, Headmistress.”

“What should, Professor?” Magdalene’s fingers, some still covered in band-aids for the deeper cuts they’d endured when saving Sam, were making slow but steady work of the many buttons on the front of her own oxford shirt.

“My voice?” She came closer, placing a knee on the edge of Sam’s bed. As she leaned over, the sides of her shirt hung limply, revealing a familiar lacy ivory bra. Sam’s throat went dry.

“My lingerie?” The pencil skirt, with its little slits that showed nothing, yet enticed beyond measure, was riding up, now revealing dark grey thigh highs, and Sam tried to moisten her lips with no success.

“My kisses?” The moment those full sensuous lips descended, enveloped, gave and took in equal measure, Sam had to stop all attempts at figuring out an answer to the questions Magdalene was asking. Were those even questions? Or just a cunning tactic to render her totally powerless in the face of sensory overload?

“You make me weak.” Sam wasn’t even aware she’d spoken out loud as the kiss ended, but Magdalene just looked at her, shedding the unbuttoned shirt and wiggling out of her skirt. Sam was certain it wasn’t meant to be seductive, but rather efficient. Nonetheless, she couldn’t help but choke and cough as she watched the material slide down those endless legs, revealing the masterpiece that were the thigh highs in full technicolor.

Then, instead of allowing Sam the pleasure of removing said masterpiece, Magdalene just rolled them off herself and pulled on a rather large, misshapen hoodie that looked remarkably like Sam’s worn Boston College one, which had gone missing after the Connecticut trip.

“Not to sound particularly like an idiot right now, but what’s happening?” Sam repeated her earlier uncomprehending facial expression and Magdalene, who was putting away her clothes, turned around and smiled.

“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.”

Damn. Sam pouted. How unfair was that? She certainly hadn’t intended for her words to sound like a complaint. Her professed weakness wasn’t of the faint or dizzy variety. Sam pouted some more, knowing full well that arguing would be useless. Protective Magdalene had made up her mind. And indeed a couple of minutes later, the infuriating woman emerged from the bathroom, hair pulled back, leaving her looking younger and more vulnerable, in Sam’s grey hoodie and a pair of boxer shorts.

Pout forgotten, Sam gaped.

“These are comfortable to sleep in, Sam. Stop staring, it’s not polite.”

The sheepish comment was softened by Magdalene climbing into bed behind her and spooning Sam closely.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

“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, feeling the band-aids still covering Magdalene’s graceful digits. She raised the hand to her mouth and placed gentle kisses on each wound.

“You’re injured too.”

“Nonsense. Sir Willoughby is far worse than I am, and he’s already back to full speed.” Magdalene’s voice sounded so close to her ear, it was sending little shivers up and down Sam’s spine.

“His full speed isn’t exactly an indicator. He’s not all that quick.”

“How dare you?” Magdalene leaned closer and bit none too gently on Sam’s earlobe. The shivers intensified. “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, amused by Magdalene’s rather serious and wholehearted defense of a ‘mangy animal’ she couldn’t stand just a couple of months ago. She wisely chose not to mention it. Instead, she tugged on the grey ragged sleeve.

“I remember this...”

Magdalene scoffed and halfheartedly tried to pull her arm away, but Sam held on.

“I have no idea what you could possibly mean.”

“You thief, this is my hoodie. I thought I lost it in Connecticut or something. And you stole it!” Sam injected a bit more outrage into her tone than she was actually feeling.

“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 tried not to laugh, tried to maintain her injured party role.

“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 since Sam had mentioned the hoodie, and dissolved into one of those unexpected but completely endearing peels of laughter. Sam joined in, holding herself snugly to her lover, feeling her shaking with mirth, overwhelmed by how much happiness such a simple act could bring.

“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 placed her cheek on Sam’s back and Sam could feel her breath through her own, thick cotton shirt.

“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.”

Sam smiled at the thought of the finicky cat and his seemingly selfish act. Maybe she

was being fanciful, but she believed it hadn't been selfish at all—quite the opposite, as he clearly grabbed the one thing his mistress must've worn a lot lately. Her tired eyes were drooping, and her mind began to wander. She ruefully thought that perhaps Magdalene not engaging in more than a couple of kisses and some teasing had been a rather good idea. She slept like a baby these days. Through the night and twice during the day. Embarrassing, but Sam guessed her body was just healing. She unsuccessfully tried to mask the yawn, but Magdalene caught her and laced their fingers together between Sam's breasts.

“At least I got to take the important stuff out of my room,” Sam mumbled.

As she was drifting away, she could swear she heard a softly whispered, “So did Willoughby,” before gentle lips kissed the nape of her neck.

* * *

And that was how her nights went. Asleep in Magdalene's arms with the whole school knowing about them. Well, what was left of the school. Lying in bed the next day, stroking Willoughby's soft fur while holding his massive bulk on her chest, Sam had a lot of time to think about what had happened and why. For once, the cat stayed with her instead of following Magdalene around, either because Sam was injured and he was sorry for her, or more likely because the atmosphere outside her door was hectic, and he simply chose to spend his time in peace and relative quiet, enjoying the spoils of his heroism. Tuna was delivered to him, just as Sam had promised during their crawl in the dark and the smoke while on their mission to find Amanda and Lily, but the finicky cat rejected the delicacy and Magdalene had to get him salmon, much to Sam's amusement. The spoiled, pampered cat who was currently loudly purring under her fingertips made for a good thinking companion though.

And Sam had many things to consider. The school, burnt down and gutted, lay in ruins. There was very little to salvage, and when she'd been brought to the makeshift

dormitory a week ago and whisked into her new room, she'd tried to avoid looking around. Tried not to have the image of the destruction embedded in her memory. She knew she'd eventually emerge—probably as soon as in three days, just long enough to escape Magdalene's scolding that she wasn't bed-bound for at least ten—and she wouldn't be able to avoid the havoc much longer.

Alden's promise and his money were already at work, and all day Sam could hear crews transporting the debris and rubble down the cliffs, where it would be disposed of. They'd clean the site, and then they'd assess what could be salvaged if anything at all. Joanne, during her multiple daily visits, informed her that the architect Alden had hired had some hope that—despite the complete collapse of the roof and the floors—the outside walls, made from centuries-old stone, worked by the hands of old masters, had every chance of being salvaged and form the foundation they could build on. This way the building would look exactly the way Dragons had looked before the fire, and the construction would go faster with the structure already in place.

The talk about Alden and his money and influence, and how he was clearing the way left and right for the construction, obtaining permits, pushing the fire marshals and investigators, made Sam's focus turn more and more to the man who'd fathered her but wasn't her father. He had stopped by her room too. He was renting a cottage in town and keeping close, determined to be by her side. And he was, in ways Sam had not expected him to be. When, a couple of days after the fire, Joel and three other trustees had descended on the island and levied accusations of sexual harassment and breach of the School Charter and her contract against Magdalene, Alden, remarkably, had the remaining four trustees' written statements that they disagreed with any motion to dismiss the Headmistress. And he threatened to hire a lawyer and sue Joel and Orla over peddling a rather intimate picture of Sam and Magdalene in a heated embrace under the sole lightbulb of the attic on the night of the fire.

Which inevitably would lead her to thoughts of Orla. Sam scratched Willoughby's

massive ginger head, and the cat purred louder, standing up for a couple of seconds to make biscuits on her chest before settling down again under her caress.

Orla was a fresh wound, far more painful than the one the stitches on her temple held together. She still had not fully processed her own feelings about Alden's parentage and his so-called attempts at reconciliation and affection, but everything about Orla, who—in sharp contrast to Alden—had actually been a parental figure to her, just hurt. And nothing made sense.

Raw and blistered and burning, Sam could not identify a single emotion where the former headmistress was concerned that allowed her to calm down and reflect on what had happened. She fidgeted, and Willoughby let out a rusty half meow, half growl at her inability to lay still and continue her ministrations.

Huffing out a breath, Sam tried to mentally arrange the recent events like cards in front of herself, laying them down on an imaginary table, attempting to make sense of what she now knew.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

Orla had threatened Sam that choosing Magdalene over her would lead to personal consequences. Orla had avoided Sam in the days leading up to the fire. And then Orla had lured Sam to the attic that was filled with debris and set the room on fire with Sam and Magdalene there. There was no rhyme or reason to any of the events of that night. That she had fled the island with a picture of Sam and Magdalene, proving their affair to the trustees the same night as the fire had occurred, made even less sense.

Willoughby's sudden growl and an angry hiss startled her, but seconds later there was a knock on the door and Joanne came in. Willoughby's signal for intruders was on point, as always, with him sensing the approach of anyone he didn't approve of. And since that was a rather extensive list with only one exception—and George had not yet been by—his growls and hisses were quite frequent these days, with Sam's visitors being so numerous. Sam gave Willoughby a reassuring pat, and he settled back again, despite the intrusion and the interruption of his rest.

Even as Joanne stepped over the threshold, Sam sat up straight in bed. The cat! Jesus, the cat! The one thread that she hadn't been able to grasp, the one thread that had been eluding her for days, now suddenly was firmly within her reach. She bolted from the bed, scaring Joanne with the sudden movement, and in the process dislodged the disgruntled tom who slinked out of the room in an extreme huff.

“Sammy, what are you doing? You need to lie down, dear!”

“Jo! Jo! It wasn't Orla! It wasn't, she couldn't have done it. I need to see her. I need to see that picture.” Manic, determined, she began to pull on her jeans, hopping on one leg, before she got dizzy and had to sit down with the room spinning around her.

“Oh god, baby. I told you, you need to lie down!” Joanne’s hands on her shoulders tried and failed to push her back on the bed.

“No, Jo, I need to go. You don’t understand... I need to see Orla. I know who did it. Who’s been behind it all along!”

Joanne tsked at her, but to Sam’s surprise got down on her knees and started helping her put her jeans on.

“I keep telling you that these pants are just too tight, even on your skinny ass. How do you even pull them up?” She shook her head with intense disapproval, all the while efficiently getting Sam into the garment. A mother’s skill was unsurpassed at pretty much anything, as far as Sam was concerned. “And I was coming here to tell you, stubborn girl. They let Orla out on bail a couple of days ago. Something about messages and pictures. I don’t really know the details. Magdalene got the call earlier. She wanted to come and tell you herself, but she’s locked in negotiations with Rodante all afternoon, to take over the whole French department since none of the girls staying are taking French...”

Sam interrupted the monologue with an impatient wave of her hand. “Where is Orla now? She’s out, but where is she? Where do I even find her? Is she back on the island?”

“Well, we know that, with the wind spreading the ash and embers from the Main Hall, the roof of her cottage was damaged, so she couldn’t have gone there. Magdalene said she heard a rumor that Orla’s rented a cottage in town, that she is determined to stay close and prove her innocence.”

“Jo, that’s great! Now help me find out which cottage!” Sam bent over to pull on her socks, but as the room spun again, she eyed Jo nervously. “Oh, and maybe help me put socks on too.” Her smile was tentative and impish, and Jo kissed her forehead,

bopping her nose.

“Always were cheeky. Smart, too. Now tell me what the plan is, and we shall see about calling that one realtor boy I know in town. His mom used to be our Mess Hall cook years ago. He’ll help us find out which cottage Orla is leasing.”

* * *

Joanne and her adroitness, as well as the fact that she knew absolutely everyone in town, had made their quest to find Orla a relatively easy one. Knocking on this particular door wasn’t easy for Sam, but even as she raised her hand, the door in question swung open with enough force that Sam needed to grab hold of Joanne’s arm, which had supported her all through their journey down the cliffs and into town.

“I saw you through the window, Sam. I didn’t do this, I swear. On anything and everything I hold dear. I was horrible to you that evening and the entire summer. Forgive me, please, forgive me. I was obsessed, and I said and did hurtful things, but I didn’t do this.”

The apology, belated as it was, sounded sincere, and Sam’s tender and bruised heart, perhaps too starved for parental love and approval, betrayed her. She wanted to forgive. Wanted to run into that warm embrace. Feel safe again, as she had when Orla had held her when she was just a lonely kid. But there were other things she had to get to first. If she was right, they’d have time to mend bridges later.

“Show me the picture, Orla.”

“Sam... I didn’t take it. I swear. I wasn’t even there. I was going back to my office to harass poor Amanda. The picture was emailed to me, and as soon as I got it, I got my friend to take me on his boat to see Joel. It was like a red mist descended when I saw it. It was all I needed to get Nox fired...”

“Orla, I know. Show me the picture. I need to see it.”

Orla rummaged around behind herself where a purse was hanging from a hook and took out her phone. After a couple of clicks, she handed the device to Sam.

She didn’t know what she’d expected when the final piece of the puzzle clicked into place. She thought if she ever figured out who was behind all the terrible things that had happened to her and Magdalene in the past months, she’d feel a sense of righteousness, some kind of jubilation. Maybe relief. Instead, there was nothing. Nothing but a heavy tinge of regret, because she was about to break Magdalene’s heart.

* * *

Joanne and Orla flanked her as they approached the new, much smaller Headmistress’ office. Sam entered without knocking and Magdalene raised her head in surprise at the interruption, displeasure etched across her face until she saw Sam, when warmth replaced it. When Orla followed, a myriad of reactions—confusion, concern, and anger—took over in quick succession. Magdalene’s face was always such a beautiful study of emotions in motion. Sam could watch forever. But now was not the time, and even as Magdalene slowly rose to her feet, hands balled on the desk, all but vibrating with fury, Willoughby mirrored her stance from his newly acquired pillow on the windowsill.

“What is going on here?” The voice was deceptively calm, but Sam could feel the storm brewing under the surface. Willoughby, after loudly showing his displeasure at the interruption, laid back down, and contented himself with watching them wearily and letting out an occasional growl.

Just as Sam was about to answer, the door opened again and George walked in, carrying a handful of files. The office suddenly felt very crowded. But despite

another unannounced arrival, the cat remained silent. Yeah, Sam thought, it was good to be right. Too bad it was at Magdalene's expense.

"This is what's going on, Magdalene." Sam motioned with her hand in the direction of Willoughby, who just looked at her as if he understood that she was talking about him.

"Sam, you're not making any sense and you should be in bed. Your concussion..."

"Magdalene, the cat didn't growl. The night of the fire. Up in the attic, Willoughby did not growl or hiss once." She reached behind herself and Orla placed the phone in her hand. Laying the device screen up on the desk, Sam pointed to the intimate closeup taken from a really nice angle that showcased their intertwined bodies, hands gripping, mouths together, oblivious to the world, lost in a kiss. The picture even showed Willoughby about a foot away from them, calmly cleaning himself in the pile of rubbish.

"For Orla to take this picture... For anyone to take this picture, to be this close, but more importantly at this particular angle, Willoughby would've been the first to let us know someone was there with us. And yet, he never uttered a sound. Wonder why?"

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

Magdalene looked at her, eyes going wide and then turning a particular shade of cold blue, amber becoming obscured by pain and anger. Yes, Sam thought. Hadn't they laughed at this before? Hadn't they joked about how the cat—who despite growing up in a crowded school, or maybe because of that, was still quasi feral—refused to allow anyone near him after being smothered with affection as a kitten? How the cat worshipped Magdalene and had understood that she loved certain people, and how he accepted those people as 'his'. How there were only two such people at whose surprise entrances he never growled at anymore, because they were Magdalene's and by extension his?

Sam watched as Magdalene closed her eyes and let her head drop to her chest slowly. As she gracefully sat back in her chair, she finally looked at Joanne and Orla who were standing like sentinels by the door.

“Ladies, will you give us the room, please? Oh, and Professor Fenway? If you would contact Sheriff Green, I'd really appreciate it.”

When the door closed behind them, the silence was deafening. How could Sam have been so blind as to not see the clues before? The biggest gossip at school? The most loyal friend? The one who was always there? First at the scene of every incident? The one who had worshipped at Magdalene's altar for years. Hadn't Sam occasionally wondered about this kind of loyalty? About what inspired this level of blind devotion? Magdalene would laugh it off, saying they were like sisters. That they knew each other. And yet, after all these years, it turned out that George Leroy was a complete stranger to her.

Of Wolves & Obsessions

In the quiet of the office, loud breathing could be heard, and it took Sam a couple of long moments to realize she was the one almost panting. Magdalene sat silently, her hands still balled on the desk, eyes ice-cold and looking straight at George. Sam might as well not have been in the room. She felt superfluous but was determined—no matter how unpleasant the upcoming exchange would be—to stay until Sheriff Green arrived.

George was not looking at anyone in particular, her eyes shifting restlessly from one object to the next, to the next, as if seeking purchase and not finding it. Sam could actually sympathise with the feeling. Everything was falling apart, and nothing would ever be the same. She thought if it were anyone but Magdalene, she might even feel sorry for George. But it was Magdalene, and all Sam felt was rage and an overwhelming need to know why.

The silence 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 was the only sound permeating the room. And then, just as she was about to say something undoubtedly stupid and out of place, George's quiet 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."

Sam was afraid to move, eyes darting from one woman to another. One a picture of anger in repose, the other one of fear and regret in motion.

"Maggie, say something." George kept wringing her hands, fingers trembling, before suddenly moving towards Magdalene, as did Sam, instinctively stepping between the

two women.

George laughed then, the broken sound ringing hollow in the small office.

“You are such a guard dog, Sammy.” Her name was almost spat, and Sam felt the urge to wipe her face, but giving George the satisfaction seemed to be the wrong thing to do, and so she just stood there silently.

“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 annoyance she meant to convey.

“Could’ve fooled me, George.” Sam felt the words in her bones. Her back teeth seemed to hurt from the sheer lack of any inflection in Magdalene’s tone, devoid of any emotion. The words were just empty, hollow. And before her, George seemed to feel it too, her face was pure agony now.

“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 Sam could tell her mouth was dry and that nothing would help her at the moment.

“Could’ve fooled me, George.” The same words, same lack of any emotion behind them.

“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.”

And now Sam knew the dam had broken and that her earlier need to know the reasons why would be satisfied. Except looking at the pitiful woman in front of her, Sam suddenly wanted nothing more than to leave this room, and to not be exposed to the story that was about to unfold.

But Magdalene remained motionless, still not looking at either her or George, and Sam knew she couldn't leave, couldn't bear to abandon her lover to whatever was coming. She had already lived through enough experiences alone, the least Sam could do was to be here for her when she was about to hear the truth behind what she went through.

“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 finally sitting down and lowering her head onto her palms, eyes drinking Magdalene in with a sick sort of adulation.

“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 Sam could feel even more uncomfortable, she would. Yet Magdalene still sat completely motionless, jaw set, eyes cold. But Sam could have sworn there was something akin to pity in them now.

“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 just looked on. Silent, apathetic.

“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 worshipped.”

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 Magdalene’s features.

“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.”

“You were my friend, George.” As Magdalene finally broke her silence, her voice was low, sadness permeating it, and Sam’s heart broke all over again. This was sad indeed, and creepy, and horrible. This obsession must have grown like a sickness in George’s heart. Sam could see where this was going all too clearly now. Still, George spoke on, seemingly not hearing Magdalene’s quiet whisper.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

“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?” The whisper was still quiet, but the note of melancholy was gone from it. It had a scary quality behind it now, a panther coiling for a strike, and Sam thought that George must not even care anymore.

“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 now, just glistening with unshed tears, seemingly looking into the past.

“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?” Again the whisper came, steeped in a deep calm, but Sam knew the chilling steadiness of her voice hid a heart that was rending for the past horrors.

“He deserved it. He’d have cheated on you regardless, sooner or later. So I made sure it happened sooner.”

“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. Slowly, as if her legs were not really holding her, she stood up, rooted to a spot, hands flat on the dark oaken surface, face turned down.

“Go on.” Sam would’ve bet her entire bank account—such as it was—that those two words and the meaning behind them were the last thing Magdalene really wanted to happen at the moment. But there seemed to be more, a well of madness, indeed all-consuming, and George needed to voice it, and Magdalene needed to hear it.

“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, unable to hide her reaction to the revelations that just kept coming any longer. Disturbing wasn’t even the right word anymore to describe what was happening, what had happened.

“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. She continued as she turned back to Magdalene, but the venom never left her tone.

“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 fall, the expression in her eyes reverted to being just 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.

"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!"

And now there was no trace of anything resembling distance in Magdalene's eyes. They shone with a strange kind of light, and Sam thought it must be truly terrifying to have that gaze directed at you. George's face said as much, the haziness disappearing and real fear taking residence there.

"You hurt Sam because she and I were together in New York?" Sam thought that she preferred the deadly calm of the questioning from before, because the rage evident in Magdalene's voice now was horrible.

"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."

“Joanne stepped on that floorboard, and only because Sam was near, she was caught in time to prevent serious injury.”

Sam still remembered the outcome of that painful afternoon when Joanne had fallen through the broken board, after doing her evening rounds of the Amber dormitories. Sam had accompanied her since they hadn't been able to hang out much lately, and Sam had missed the older woman. She was there to catch Joanne as her leg went through the floor on their way back to the faculty dormitory and she remembered thinking that things could have ended much worse if she hadn't been uncharacteristically quick that evening. As it was, Joanne had a bruised ankle to show for it, and Magdalene had been forced to find emergency funding to change the flooring in the faculty quarters.

“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 just kept pouring out. More and more and more until Sam felt she was drowning in evil, in 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.

“And the attic?” Magdalene, relentless now in her pursuit of the full truth, straightened her spine and Sam saw nothing but contempt on her face. The pity was gone, the fury was gone as well.

“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.

Magdalene moved her hand and Sam saw her hold her phone. The screen lit up and then the voice recorder was clearly visible. George’s eyes widened at the realization that she had been recorded the entire time, but Magdalene only gritted her teeth and growled, “Go on,” and George dropped 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, she did not take her eyes off Magdalene, drinking her in with decidedly sick fervor.

“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.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

“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?”

In the eerie quiet of the room, Sam knew the answer. It was all over the silence, all over George’s tears, all over her shaking hands.

“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.”

“I was never yours!” The shout, like a bullet, pierced the silence and now it was George’s turn to recoil.

Shoulders thrown back, head held high, Magdalene finally stepped out from behind the desk. Her gait sure, her movements graceful, she was all poise and beauty. Power in action. Mesmerizing. Sam caught herself staring.

“In that moment, George? That moment you hated so much? I was happy, safe and beloved! I was everything I ever wanted to be.”

The tears in George’s eyes spilled over and her sob was wretched. Magdalene’s tone did not 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.” Sam marveled that, even through what had to be the most horrible experience of her life, a betrayal of massive proportions, Magdalene was consumed with everyone else’s comfort and safety.

“And after?” George’s voice trembled with tears.

“After?” Like a bird of prey, Magdalene swept close to her, their faces inches away. “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...” Chest rising and falling, Magdalene straightened and now looked down at George, eyes sparkling and nostrils flaring.

“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. George was howling and screeching about loving Magdalene, 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 ruckus.

And in the midst of all the chaos, Sam simply looked at the calm eyes returning her gaze with so much love, so much devotion. Her own eyes were swimming in tears, her chest full of relief that it was over, yet breaking with empathy for the multitude of big and small heartbreaks Magdalene had lived through because of George's obsession. And so she simply looked on, pouring into her gaze all her love, all her support, all her gratitude for this woman, and hoped that Magdalene would understand, would feel it, would be warmed and comforted by it.

25

Of Words, Caresses & Peace

The skin was warm under her lips, moving languidly under her touch, stretching luxuriously even as Sam traced each vertebra with her mouth.

Lying on her front, Magdalene was at Sam's complete mercy, pliant, fully relaxed, luxuriating in the gentle caress of Sam's lips on her spine.

"One... Two..." Sam licked and kissed and felt the chuckle shaking the delicate shoulders under her touch.

"I'm sure there's no need for an audit report, Sam. They're all there."

"And they're all gorgeous. And it's only fair since you did, after all, try to count my freckles. This is easier. You know I could write poetry about your back. The expanse of flawless skin over firm, toned muscles over slim, fragile bones..."

"It feels like you're already writing that poetry, darling. Your talents are wasted in that stuffy math department of yours." Magdalene turned slowly in Sam's arms, smooth skin gliding over smooth skin, raising goosebumps and awakening a hunger that, despite having been sated many times over tonight, was always just under the

surface, embers of desire easily blown into flames again. She stretched, gracefully arching her back and offering her breasts to Sam's mouth, but before Sam could lower her head and take a pink, tightly furled nipple between her lips, Magdalene caught her mouth in a long, wet kiss, tasting deeply, stealing her breath away.

"You really think so?" Sam's head was swimming.

"Well, I wouldn't go that far, Sam. But you have talents I enjoy immensely, even if poetry isn't necessarily among them." The chuckle she let out was positively filthy. "For example, I like your hands."

"You like my hands, huh?" Sam's smile was slow, sly, a bit smug, and it satisfied her immensely to feel Magdalene's abdominal muscles clench under her fingertips. "Or is it my mouth you like more, Magdalene? When it moves down your body slowly..." She could feel Magdalene's desire building again, felt powerful to be able to do that with just words, something that had never come easy for her before seemed to be as natural as breathing with this woman. She felt sexy, daring.

"...When it finally arrives between your legs? Or is it my tongue you like? When it dips inside of you, when it tastes you, when it licks and licks and licks at your clit, slow, wide, firm strokes, unrelenting..." She followed her words with actions, and now her head swam for other reasons. The taste of her, the sheer unadulterated pleasure of taking Magdalene in her mouth, had Sam almost coming on the spot. Still so new, so exquisite, just a touch tangy, a touch sweet, uniquely her, Magdalene.

With Magdalene's fingers tangled in her hair, Sam took her time, savoring, not teasing, but satisfying, keeping a steady pressure. She took her lover apart several times before the weak hands finally pushed her head away, ragged breaths ringing in the quiet room.

"You are so good at that." Limp arms wrapped themselves around Sam's shoulders,

and she simply lay there, engulfed in love. Happy, safe, beloved, Magdalene's words, said to George, still ringing in her ears.

Sam remembered standing all alone on the Amber Dragon months ago, the jasmine scent surrounding her, wishing for change. They say beware what you wish for, but as Sam's wish came true in the most overwhelming fashion, all she could think was how happy she was that it had. For here she was, with the same jasmine scent around her, with Magdalene's taste on her lips, no longer alone. Happy, safe, beloved.

"You are also very, very good at sensing my moods and my needs, you know that?" Magdalene shifted slightly and long fingers, no longer limp, started massaging Sam's scalp and the nape of her neck, relaxing and enticing her at the same time.

"You mean..." Sam's voice was slightly muffled by her face finding the crook of Magdalene's shoulder and burrowing there.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

“I mean, I know that you made me come three times tonight to make me forget.”

“Four. But who’s counting?” The smart-alec remark earned her a little tug on her hair, but then the deft fingers continued their combing, slowly, gently.

“Well, apparently you were, darling. Still, thank you. I needed all the distraction I could get and will probably need more by the time the night is over.” As the fingers stilled, Sam raised her face to peer into sad eyes.

“At your service, I’m sure.” But her joke did not land, for the eyes remained sad and gained a faraway look, and so Sam settled back into the warmth between neck and shoulder, inhaling jasmine and sweat and everything that was Magdalene.

“You know there were days, probably months, if not years, where I felt I didn’t have anyone else in the world. That by some will of the Fates, I was hated and shunned by everyone, everywhere I went. And it was George. Ruining my friendships, my relationships, building that reputation of the Unapproachable Queen Bitch.” Sam squeezed the slender torso and burrowed deeper, earning herself a kiss on the injured temple before Magdalene went on.

“I told you before, I have felt hunted by wolves all my life. She knew it too. She knew that I desperately wanted peace, security, safety. That living under the constant pressure of unseen eyes on me was slowly driving me mad. There was a time at Rodante, when I was convinced absolutely everyone hated me. That my husband was cheating on me. That my colleagues despised me. That my students were sending me hateful letters. Every single wolf in the world was stalking me, Sam. I remember telling her that. I remember that evening so well.”

“What did she say?”

“That she would give anything to make me happy. I found Timothy with his PA a week later. I should have seen the signs. I should have seen that George hadn’t been with anyone for years, that she had been involved in every single small and big event in my life for twenty years...”

“Stop, this is not on you.” For the second time, Sam raised her head from the haven of Magdalene’s skin. “Nobody could have seen it coming. Timothy made his own decisions in life. Yeah, he was set up, but he could have thrown his PA out of his bed the moment he found her there. This is not your fault. And George... When she was all you had, with all the wolves at your door, who can blame you for leaning on someone who was your only friend?”

“But she wasn’t my friend, Sam. She was the beast who stalked me half of my life.”

“And now you’ve slain the beast. You were magnificent that day.”

“I lost it there at the end. What I really wanted was to slap her across the face. I took in all she had to say and all she did to me, but the thought that she wanted you dead simply because I fell in love with you, that’s what broke me. I wanted to hurt her then, Sam.”

“And you did. Knowing that she will never see you again. That she will never stand in your glow, that is the worst punishment for her.”

“Ah, writing poetry about me again, darling?”

“I can’t help it. How can I? You’re everything.”

And as Sam looked on, happiness slowly filled the beloved angular face, the taut

muscles of the jaw unclenching, the lines at her eyes smoothing, the brow unfurrowing, and the most brilliant smile overtaking the generous lips.

“I love making you smile.” Sam wasn’t aware she’d said it out loud, but the smile only grew brighter, and she was once again gathered to Magdalene’s chest.

“You’re my solace. These past months, when everything felt wrong, when things were falling apart under the weight of expectation, you were my succor. When I was afraid, when I was alone, you were my purpose, Sam.”

“And you say I’m the one writing poetry about you. You say these words and expect me not to be completely and utterly smitten?”

Another peel of laughter warmed Sam’s heart even more.

“Oh no, darling, I expect you to fall deeper, to love me more.”

“I’m still waiting to go splat, you know?”

At Magdalene’s noise of incomprehension, Sam explained.

“You know when you fall in love? First of all, where is it exactly that you’re falling? And at what point do you just smack into the bottom of whatever it is you’re falling into? Because I keep falling deeper and deeper every day and there seems to be no bottom to this well, and I’m wondering at what point I will go ‘smack’ and simply lay there, and look up at the heights I’ve fallen from and marvel at how amazing I feel about it all, despite being all broken and bruised.”

“You think I will break you, Sam?” The laughter was gone from the low, raspy voice.

“I know you wouldn’t do it intentionally.” Sam wondered, once again, about her own

tendency to ruin things without even trying. Did she have to bring up how very insecure she was?

“You know, Timothy stopped by today.” Magdalene’s voice carried a nonchalance that Sam felt was just a touch forced.

“What a polite non sequitur.” Sam bit her lip and awaited whatever came next.

“I don’t think it is, darling, not at all. I hurt him. Maybe not intentionally but I did. I married him because he so wanted me when I thought that absolutely nobody ever would, and he was persistent and charming. But he did not make me happy, and very soon I realized that I never made him happy either. We tried hard and perhaps would have lasted much longer than we did had it not been for George, but we had an ugly ending, and we were not that way when we started.”

Sam watched shadows play on the beloved features. How much guilt did Magdalene carry because of George?

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

“We talked. He wanted to come to Dragons earlier after the fire but I kept pushing back on his arrival, and now that the whole story has finally come to light, I couldn’t delay it anymore. He deserved to know that he had been used.”

“How did he take it?”

“On the chin. Surprised, insulted, humiliated, but he was overall stoic about it, I think. We managed to make our peace with the past and with each other.”

Sam hummed and Magdalene turned to face her.

“Are you jealous, darling? I did not bring him up to upset you. All this meandering of mine had a point, I swear.”

“And that point would be?” Sam knew she must have been pouting, knew it was a bit childish to be upset when the man was no threat to her at all.

“Sam Threadneedle, my point was that I am completely and totally yours. You saved my life over and over, stood up to me and for me, had my back, had me on my back, on my front too.” And now the smile was back in both the tone and on those beautiful lips. “If I hadn’t already been utterly, entirely, and totally in love with you, then seeing you march into my office like a guardian angel three days ago would have done it. Not even strong enough to stand, you took on my stalker, you uncovered the mystery, and you did it all while loving me. I will be falling in love with you ‘till the day I die, Sam. If you’ll have me, that is...”

“Is this a propos...” Sam’s mouth went dry, and she couldn’t even push the words

out.

“Do you want it to be, darling?” Magdalene’s voice was gentle, quiet. But her body under Sam’s suddenly went still, betraying her nervousness.

“I do, but not right after what happened? I do, very much, and that will be my answer too. But not when you’re still vulnerable and a little fragile and betrayed by the person you believed in for so long. I do, but on a different night?”

And the tension that had been keeping the body beneath hers rigid drained immediately. The full lips caressed her injured temple again, and lanky arms wrapped around her with renewed strength. Sam smiled, thinking how almost every other kiss Magdalene gave her was on her temple, next to where the stitches no longer hurt, but somehow still seemed to improve exponentially with every affectionate peck.

“Well, then sometime down the road I might just find such a night. But you should know, darling, there isn’t anyone on my mind when I’m like this with you. You consume me completely. Emotionally, physically. I mean those three orgasms...”

That earned her a slight poke in the ribs and she giggled, endearing herself to Sam even more, if that was possible.

“There were four. If you think I didn’t count, you’re deluding yourself, Madam Headmistress! Which one of us is the Math Chair after all?”

“Ah, maybe I’ve forgotten one of those orgasms, maybe it is well past time you reminded me, darling...” The last word was more of a breathy exhalation as Sam’s fingers found her and took her, sliding with ease into the still wet, already quivering heat.

Of Home

The breeze from the ocean ruffled the few flyaways that had escaped Sam's braid. The day had taken its toll on her, and she didn't even have the energy to push her hair away. Wearily, she sat down, the place on the rock as familiar as the chair she sat on in her classroom while teaching.

Though perhaps that was no longer true since the chair was brand new and so was the classroom. Dragons was almost finished. After the devastating fire and months and months of ruin and soot, the majestic gothic building was rising from the ashes. At times, walking from her new quarters to the Main Hall, Sam would simply stop outside the massive construction site—so old and familiar, yet so new and still shining with the finishing touches that were being put on it—and simply stare.

As she turned to the ocean, she thought how over a year ago she'd stood in this exact spot and wished for change. Through fire, dirt, cement, pain, sweat, tears, blood—some of it even her own—things had changed. She rubbed absently at the scar on her temple where the skin had evened, but a long white line remained as a reminder of what had been, of what could have been.

Sometimes, usually at night, when she thought Sam was asleep, Magdalene would trace the scar gently with her fingertips or would apply tender kisses to it. Sam would never betray the fact that she was awake. She felt like she'd be intruding on a private moment, a moment of dealing with fear and potential loss. Still, she'd always make up for it either a bit later or in the morning after, making long gentle love to Magdalene, affirming her own existence, her continuous presence in this world, this school, this relationship, this bed.

And that was another change. She had a brand new bed now. And a brand new place to call her quarters. A place she officially shared with Magdalene. A place where Willoughby had a cushion on each windowsill, even though he still followed

Magdalene around the school throughout the day. The Board had agreed that having the dormitories be in the wings of the Main Hall was no longer a feasible and—as had been proven during the fire—safe choice. And so the old wings were taken down and four new dormitories, one for each of the Dragons and one for the faculty, had been erected. And off the beaten path, close to Amber Cliff, a little cottage for the Headmistress had been built, which Sam now called hers as well.

When Alden had shown her the plans for it, Sam had balked. The silent acceptance from this man rankled. He had thrown a young Magdalene out of the school for simply being who she was, had left Sam to fend for herself when she was a child, had only acknowledged her when he had nobody else. Sam still struggled with his place in her life, or whether he even deserved a place at all. But of all people, Magdalene had taken Alden's role in the reconstruction of the school with an ease that surprised Sam and a level of acceptance and forgiveness she could not understand at all.

Later that night, sated and spent, snuggled together under the covers, Sam had asked her about it and she'd smiled enigmatically, stretched her arms above her head, pulling what remained of the pins holding up her auburn hair, mesmerizing Sam for a couple of long moments.

“You'd prefer me to refuse him? To turn him away? To rile and to revolt after all these years? Sam, not only is it counterproductive, but it's also not sustainable. Say I throw this back in his face, say I throw away the other literally millions of things he's done for the school and for us... Where would that leave me? I cannot speak for you, darling, nor can I tell you how to feel about him. His sins where you are concerned are enormous. As for me... Have I forgiven him? No. And he hasn't asked.”

“And if he asks?” Sam reached and traced a fingertip from the long line of the alabaster throat to the collarbone to the sternum, stopping in the center of Magdalene's chest, where she laid her palm flat, feeling the beloved heart beat steadily under her touch.

“Then I will cross that bridge when I get to it, Sam. I’m not the one with the forgiveness he craves, anyway. You are, and it is only you who can decide to give it to him. In the meantime, I’m simply being practical. I accept what he gives willingly. If not for him assuaging his guilt, Dragons would still lie in ruins. Sure, insurance would have helped somewhat and I would have fundraised enough over the years to bring the school back, but it would’ve taken time, favors, and a lot of effort. Would you have wanted me to refuse him? To go hat-in-hand into the world?”

“No, the school needed his money.”

“Ah, it’s about the cottage then. Because when I accepted the plans, darling, I in no way accepted them for both of us. Though I assume, Alden had decided that I’d done the honorable thing and had already asked you the important question. Which I have not, and turns out he gave me way more credit than I deserve. And you assume I accrued on your behalf in accepting the house when that wasn’t actually my intention at all.”

She rose gracefully from where she was lounging against the headboard and slowly took off the remnants of her clothes, which they’d both neglected in their earlier hurry, before walking naked, unselfconscious around the bed and slipping into Sam’s lap, making Sam dizzy just watching her. Idly, a thought crossed her mind—that it had been over a year since they’d met in New York and their chemistry was still electric. This woman still stopped her heart and took her breath away. Sam hoped that would never, ever change.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

“I think we should talk, Sam.” The words sounded strange, and Sam’s dazed-by-the-nudity mind didn’t quite catch them initially. When she finally caught up, her breath stilled for different reasons.

“Ah, maybe we shouldn’t talk about serious things while you are naked and in my lap. I think that puts me at a disadvantage...” The words came out slightly breathless, the skin-to-skin contact rendering Sam fairly useless at cogent thought.

“Let’s just say that I want to use every advantage I have, darling. I want every single ace up my sleeve for this conversation. If you think I will play fair, you’ll have to think again.” She lightly nipped at Sam’s ear, and Sam stopped thinking altogether. The wicked mouth moved lower, certainly leaving traces of red lipstick in its wake along Sam’s jaw before finally settling on Sam’s lips and going in for the kill.

“And I think I will need every one of those aces when I apologize to you, Sam. For letting Alden believe certain things about us. For allowing things to progress to the point of both of us having been put in front of a fait accompli. I should have taken you to the mainland and wined and dined you like you deserve. Wooed you. And then I should have properly asked you to move in with me. Instead, you got these plans for the cottage from Alden, and me rather gauchely accepting what this means from the hand of a man you have a very complicated history with. I am sorry, Sam. Forgive me?” Her fingers stilled in Sam’s hair, and for a moment the room was quiet but for the sounds of their breathing.

“You certainly don’t play fair, Madam Headmistress.” Sam smiled and watched the tension she hadn’t expected to find there drain from Magdalene’s face.

“Does this mean you will move in with me?” The strain might have eased from her features, but the voice was still tentative. The fact that Magdalene never took Sam’s love for granted was always a revelation.

“It does. Though, Reverend Lavalle might have something to say about us living in sin.”

Magdalene laughed, that low laughter setting Sam’s skin on fire.

“Well, then I guess I’ll have to get naked again and ask you another question sometime soon, darling.”

“Ah, I see how it is, you don’t want to upset the good chaplain.” Sam nipped at the shoulder that was right in front of her, and her palms covered the beautiful breasts that it had taken all her effort not to touch during this conversation. Magdalene arched into her caress, trying to offer more of herself to Sam’s hands and mouth.

“Sam, I really don’t give a flying fuck about the good Reverend.”

“I love it when you revert to profanity.” Sam moved her lips higher, where the neck met the jaw, biting and licking, knowing how that spot aroused her lover. Her fingers pinched the already tightly furled nipples, and Magdalene let out a decidedly dirty moan. But before Sam could say anything, a hand to her face stopped her. Thumb caressing her cheekbone, Magdalene looked her dead in the eye.

“Sam, I love you, I will propose because I love you, not because I care what anyone says.”

“Ah, well... Yes, hmmm...”

“Incoherent. How I like you best. Now fuck me, Sam, I want you to, so much.”

Sam had not needed to be told twice.

* * *

And so she'd found herself with a new place to live and a new place to work. The notable year in the history of Three Dragons, finished with just ten seniors graduating, and the other two hundred students due to return next year. Sam felt an overwhelming sense of accomplishment for shepherding these young women into the world despite all the hardship of the last months, the uncertainty, and the sheer amount of stress of the situation they'd found themselves in.

She'd had many reasons to come to this cliff in the past year, despite the fact that her life had settled into a routine and a rhythm that made her happy. Still, she felt restless tonight. Maybe because some of the issues remained largely unresolved. Alden was one and Orla was another. The former headmistress had submitted a letter of resignation the second George had been taken into custody. She'd been contrite and apologetic to both Sam and Magdalene. The proverbial ashes she poured over her hair were copious indeed.

Yet Magdalene had refused. Finding a new, experienced, and respected history teacher two-thirds into a semester to come in and live in tiny quarters and teach the remaining seniors in makeshift classrooms would have been complicated. And so Orla stayed and exorcised her guilt for being a gullible patsy to George's obsession. And slowly Sam's heart was starting to let go of the hurt and insult Orla had caused, but deep down she knew their relationship would never be the same.

But as Joanne had put it one late night over glasses of red wine, Sam didn't owe Orla forgiveness, but if said forgiveness was to be given, the transgression should never be brought up again and everyone would need to move on. Otherwise, Orla would be apologizing for the rest of her life, and things would remain tedious for everyone involved. And, Joanne added, as soon as everyone understood that and learned to live

with it, everyone would be much better off in the long run. Sam had agreed. She still had to utter the actual words, but their relationship had been patched up some, and Orla would occasionally join Joanne and Sam for their wine nights, disguised as tea drinking.

Still the remaining faculty, despite their trials and tribulations, had finished the colossal job of helping the seniors graduate. All ten seniors were accepted to various prestigious schools. Lily received the Vivian DeVor Scholarship for LGBTQIA Youth and chose to go to UCLA with Amanda, who followed her there with a full ride based on her excellence in math. Sam took a lot of pride in that achievement. She was also particularly happy that the girls would be together, even if their studies took them all the way across the country. Sam would find a way to keep in touch.

And speaking of touch, a furry head bumped into her flank before squeezing a rather pudgy body under her arm for a requisite scratch, then settled on the ground at her feet with a languid stretch.

Sam and Willoughby had established a rather nice cohabitation routine. He allowed her to pet him on occasion and did not object much when she monopolized his mistress' time and attention. Which was a lot lately, since said mistress was rather completely enamored with Sam, a fact that was both entirely shocking and elating to Sam herself.

As had been the norm for the past year, Willoughby's arrival heralded the slightly delayed, familiar sound of Magdalene's steps on the rocks of Amber Cliff.

"You were so tired earlier. I looked for you at home, darling."

Home. Sam turned away, unexpected hot tears burning behind her eyes, threatening to spill. She shook her head, trying to give herself enough time to will away the treacherous tears, but promptly lost the battle, sensing the first of them breaking

through. Warm, soft hands touched her cheeks, wiping under her eyes before a gentle kiss was pressed to her temple, exactly where the long white line marred her skin before disappearing into her hairline.

“It’s okay to feel this way. It’s a lot of change, darling.”

“I don’t think I ever told you, but the day before your arrival at Dragons, I stood on this very cliff and wished for change, for something to give, for something to break free...”

Magdalene shifted slightly to accommodate Sam’s head on her shoulder.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:52 pm

“You know what they say, darling, beware what you wish for.” Her tone was warm, filled with love and simple comfort. How different it was from the one that she had used to announce, “You’re fired,” all those months ago.

“I think it all turned out alright. Don’t you?”

“I wish some things would have ‘turned out’ differently. I regret being as blind as I was.”

Sam squeezed the waist she was embracing and pressed her face into the warmth of Magdalene’s neck.

“She was your friend. Sometimes your only friend. If this was me, you’d tell me not to be too hard on myself. To be gentle and considerate of someone who was holding on to her friend, even if said friend turned out to be a creepy stalker.”

Magdalene ran her fingers through the short hairs at the nape of Sam’s neck, making her shiver.

“You read me a little too easily these days, darling.”

“No, I merely love you more every day, and you share yourself with me more every day.”

“Flatterer.”

In the ensuing silence, Magdalene reached for a satchel that Sam initially hadn’t

noticed she'd been carrying and sat up straight, letting go of Sam while she rummaged inside. She pulled out a thin book, and Sam's heart clenched.

"You know, I don't tend to be regretful for too long, what with running the school and loving you and rebuilding all of this? Who has the time for regrets and remorse? But I regret that some things were lost in that fire. I know how much restoring 'The Light Princess' and getting a copy with your own money meant to you." Her hands caressed the antique book and Sam simply stared.

"I took the liberty of contacting the Boston Public Library, and it turns out they are fundraising again, wouldn't you know it? They were more than ready to sell one of their two copies to me. This one having been restored ten years ago by one Samantha Anne Threadneedle, Boston College student. It says so right here on the insert of the dust jacket."

What tears hadn't spilled before were suddenly flowing freely down Sam's cheeks. But this time Magdalene did not reach to wipe them away, simply watching Sam's face and speaking softly.

"You are the true hero of our book, Sam. You, who saved the day, almost lost your life, made sure the school got rebuilt, took your father's place on the Board and, with your brains and nerdy math skills, rejuvenated the endowment... It is you who allowed my dream to come true. To see Dragons prosper. And to be able to share it with the one I love. I was simply helping you along, darling. If me holding your hand along the way has made it even a little easier for you to succeed, I'm grateful for that chance, Sam."

Magdalene opened the book where a piece of paper was sticking out like a bookmark, and Sam could see it was a printout of airplane tickets.

"You know me, Sam. I can't quite stop myself from going overboard. But this time it's absolutely necessary. Once the dust settles here, you and I will take that European

trip you've been dreaming about. And none of this backpacking stuff. I'm much too old to be sleeping in tents. And indoor plumbing is a must. I hope you'll accept staying at some finer hotels with me, darling."

Sam sniffled, and Magdalene offered a lace handkerchief. Trust this woman to not only be prepared but to also do so in style. Sam wiped her eyes and tried to gather her scattered thoughts.

"I thought for the longest time that you were my Light Princess. My wanderer, the one who came and settled at Dragons and found a heart and home," Sam whispered and covered the hands that were still folded on the battered cover of the hundred-year-old book with her own and felt them shake slightly under her touch. "But I was wrong, Magdalene. I may not have been wandering, but I was still lost. I may have had a place, but I was untethered. You came, and you gave me two things I'd never had, not in the way I dreamt about having them. You gave me love, and you gave me home."

The smile that her words were met with was blinding.

"Are you saying that I am the Prince in this equation? Me? The Prince?"

Sam laughed at the faux haughty expression on her lover's face. Those eyes that never ever lied were filled with such love and such warmth, the blue almost completely overtaken by amber.

"You are very princely at times. You even have your own entourage." She gestured towards the sleeping Willoughby, snoring peacefully, oblivious to the joy surrounding him.

"I do have an entourage, who'd have thought?" Magdalene's face was suddenly serious. "I hope you know it, Sam, I have everything I need these days."

“So do I. Everything I need.”

They sat on the Amber Dragon Cliff, their hands clasped over an ancient book with Willoughby at their feet, purring loudly, in perfect sync with the summer breeze coming from the ocean and the blooming jasmine at their backs. They were together; they were safe; they were home.