

Tiptoeing his way down the hallway of his house, Harry could hear the soft murmurs of voices from the kitchen and just couldn't help himself. Some might call it a character flaw, his curiosity, but his mother just warned him not to let it get him into any situation he couldn't evade. *Especially once I get to Hogwarts next year.*

Still, he didn't see any harm in letting curiosity get the best of him in his home. The door to the kitchen was open just a crack, the light from within cutting in a ray through the darkness. Carefully, he made his way over, staying just out of the light and hidden behind the door.

"I don't understand why you keep doing this to yourself, Marlene?!" His mother sounded utterly exasperated, as though this was a conversation that'd been had a dozen times over or more, "What is it going to take, hmm? Tell me."

There was some sniffing as the other woman in the kitchen tried to form a response. Harry knew very well who it was... Marlene McKinnon. She'd been friends with Lily since her schooldays, even though she was a couple years younger and a Ravenclaw. After James's death, he knew that Marlene was a great source of comfort and support for the young widow.

There were very few of his earliest memories that didn't include her: her, his mother, and Sirius. And even at ten, he had a feeling that he knew exactly what was causing this late-night heart to heart between the two women. Because as much as he loved his godfather, he was old enough to understand some of the worst parts of his nature.

"I... don't know." Marlene's voice was small, a far cry from the usually joyful tones that he was accustomed to. It didn't matter when it happened, but anytime she saw him, there was a smile on her face. He loved her smile, and he could never help but blush when it was directed his way. His mum took a great deal of joy in teasing him about his boyhood crush. *At least Marls never does.*

"You don't know..." He could imagine his mum throwing her hands up in frustration. He'd been on the receiving end of the same reaction more than a few times in his life, though oftentimes through no fault of his own.

But he heard the frustration leave Lily's voice before she spoke more quietly to her friend, "Marls... this has been going on for years. Sirius is..." he knew that she didn't like talking badly about his father's best friend, especially since he did a good job as his godfather, but in this case, he deserved it, "Sirius is a cad. He strings you along, tells you all the things that you want to hear, and then every time things get even remotely serious, he goes and breaks your heart again."

“I know...”

“Or do I need to remind you about the time that you caught him in the girl’s lavatory on the fourth floor with Lizzy Culcombe? Or after Harry’s birthday party two years ago with Milly Isaacs from down the road?” Marlene tried to get a word in, but his mum was being absolutely relentless, “Or how about six months ago when you went to that muggle concert, and you caught him with some random woman on her knees behind the loos of all places?!”

“I know!” Marlene’s voice cracked as she was wracked with sobs. Her words were stilted as she tried to explain herself, “It’s stupid, and self-destructive and every other thing you’ve ever told me, but every time he comes back, I just... I take him back. And things are perfect for a while until we just fall back into the same cycle as always.”

Taking the risk, Harry could see them through the small crack in the door. They were sitting at the kitchen table. His mum had Marlene in her arms as she cried. Her blouse grew wetter with each passing second, but Lily didn’t seem to mind, “Every time, he plays you for a fool because he knows that he can get away with it. Because he knows that you won’t **finally** just do the right thing for **you** and cut him off for good.”

Holding her at arm’s length, Lily waited for her friend to look at her, “You’re a beautiful woman, Marls, inside and out. You know it, and I know it, and so does Sirius which is why he comes crawling back every time you even enter the presence of another man.”

That made her let out a weak, wet chuckle, “I’m nothing special, Lils...”

Lily rolled her eyes, “Try telling that to Harry.”

“Harry doesn’t count. And besides one person is only an exception, not the rule.” Marlene told her, and Harry could honestly say, hearing that hurt.

“It’s not just Harry! You only think that because you’ve let Sirius treat you like hippogriff shite since you were thirteen years old.” His mum was being harsh, but it was exactly what Marlene needed not hear, “You deserve someone who genuinely cares about you, who isn’t constantly going behind your back, who wants you and only you, who will actually give you the things that you want in a partner. You deserve better than Sirius!”

For a long moment, the two women just stared at each other. There were tear tracks running down Marlene’s face, and her hair was a bit of a mess, but she still looked beautiful as far as Harry was concerned, “I just... I know you’re right. But knowing and doing aren’t the same thing Lils. And what if I never find someone else? What if I do and Sirius just keeps harassing them?”

“Are you a witch or not?” His mum snorted out a laugh, “If he spends a few days as a slug, it might give him a thing or two to think about.”

That finally made Marlene laugh, full and long. She wiped the tears from her cheeks, “Too bad he’s still a Black, otherwise I could just curse his bollocks off and do the whole of witch-kind a favor.”

“I’ve threatened to take him to the vet a dozen times... and meant it most of them.”

As their conversation fell into more mundane topics, Harry backed away from the door and retreated up to his room.

Staring at himself in the mirror, Harry tried and failed to tame his unruly hair. Relenting, he let it sit in its usual tousled state. It didn’t even look bad if he was being perfectly honest with himself, he was just nervous.

It was an important day, at least as far as he was concerned. He was six months post-graduation from Hogwarts, and things were looking great. He was in the midst of a double apprenticeship in Charms and Transfiguration backed by McGonagall and Flitwick, as well as taking strides toward entering the professional dueling tournament.

Everyone was very proud of his accomplishments, none more so than his mum, Sirius, and Marlene. But it was the latter that he was most concerned about. Unlike what most would expect of a young boy’s crush, his never faded. It only became stronger as he grew from a boy into a young man. *Though I do a far better job of hiding it these days.*

He still thought that Marlene was the most gorgeous, brilliant woman in the world, and he intended to prove it to her.

The older witch listened to his mother after that conversation all those years ago... for a time. She cut Sirius off for a solid three years, but found the dating market... lacking to say the least. The few men she dated left her with a sour taste in her mouth, and she resolved herself to be a celibate. He remembered quite well the day she lamented to his mum, “The first boy you saw on the train to Hogwarts fell head over heels in love with you. He never even looked in another woman’s direction! If only we could all be so lucky!”

And so, when Sirius finally seemed to correct his behavior as he aged out of his twenties, Marlene fell back into old habits and took him back. For a while, Harry actually believed that his rogue of a godfather had finally turned over a new leaf. As much as it pained him at fourteen to see the woman he adored with someone else, long before he’d ever have a chance, it was still good to see her happy.

But as much as he loved his godfather, he couldn't overcome his worst nature. And just a few months ago it all came crashing down. *Burned to the ground with nothing left to remember but ash.* There was talk of engagement and the future when Marlene came over to their house a complete wreck. She caught the dog with a witch barely out of Hogwarts. He remembered Marietta Edgecombe and couldn't help his utter shock. *Talk about trading down.*

Harry and Lily worked together to comfort her and had even managed it. *Though it did end in her swearing off men for the rest of time.* It didn't exactly bode well for his intentions, but he had every confidence in himself that he could be the exception rather than the rule. It took years of patience to reach a point where he could finally show Marlene the sort of things that she deserved, and he wasn't going to let the memory of Sirius' stupidity ruin it for him.

Neither of the Potters had spoken to Sirius since. Well, that wasn't wholly true, Lily had given him a proper piece of her mind and sent him fleeing from their home in terror by the time she was done with him. *I hope he finally gets the message to just leave Marlene alone.*

If his godfather wanted to be a cad, that was his prerogative. *But don't try to be in a relationship and hurt someone repeatedly in the process.* He knew that they would talk again at some point, probably soon, as even Marlene didn't want them to cut him out for her sake. *She doesn't realize how much I'd be willing to do for her sake, but after today, she will.*

He heard the door to the house open and close, and then a sweet voice call up, "Harry? You here?" When she didn't get an immediate response, she asked again, "Anyone home?"

With one last look in the mirror, he hurried to the door and down the steps into their front room. Marlene was standing there in a warm winter coat, her copper hair up in a loose ponytail, "Hey, Marls!"

Giving a little whistle of approval, she watched him as he came down the stairs, "Aren't you looking good? Can't believe none of those Hogwarts girls snatched you up while you were still in school! I swear you get more handsome every time I see you!"

He couldn't help but smile and remind her, "You say that every time you see me. Every. Time. Since as long as I can remember."

Marlene poked him on the nose, giggling as she was too slow to avoid his tongue before she pulled away, "And it's been true. Every. Time."

"Even when I was pouring sweat after a quidditch match?"

“Even then.” She assured him with a soft smile. They just looked at each other as Harry felt a charge between them. Something unspoken that he wanted to explore, but knew it wasn’t the right time yet. Her smoky grey eyes darted down to look at his lips, just for a moment before she asked, “So, what did you want to do today?”

“Well, with mum out of town, I thought it’s as good a time as any to get a bit of Christmas shopping done.” He went to grab his coat from the hook.

“And you want a feminine touch to help you out?” Marlene nodded approvingly, “Smart lad, that sort of thinking will take you a long way.”

“I did learn from two of the best.” He assured her and offered his arm, “And I thought I’d treat you to dinner...”

“You really don’t have to do that...”

“I want to though.” Harry turned to her with a look that he’d perfected over the years. His eyes got big and there as he insisted, “My treat really.”

“Oh... that’s not even fair, Harry. You know it isn’t.” She gave a little sigh, but they both knew that it was only for show, “Fine... you can take me to dinner.”

“It’ll be my pleasure.” With that she took his arm, and he apparated them to London.

They made their way through Herrod’s stopping off at more than one store to peruse what they had to offer. He bought his mother a new pair of trainers for an exorbitant amount of money, that thankfully wasn’t a problem for him. She’d expressed an interest in getting into jogging as a way of decompressing to Marlene, and he thought that was a good place to start.

“Just make sure she doesn’t see the price-tag when you give those to her, yeah?” They both knew Lily well enough that she’d surely balk at it. While James had come from money, the Evans were just your average working class muggle family, and Lily still very much lived that way. But to Harry’s mind, his mum deserved nice things. *And so does Marls.*

They spent a few quiet hours going through the store, finding little things here and there that he was sure that his mum would like. There was a neatly knitted sweater that was softer than a cloud and a new purse that would be perfect if she decided to see a theatre show. But he wasn’t buying for his mother alone. Marlene was busy looking at things, so she didn’t catch him at the till purchasing a rose gold necklace just for her.

They were pursuing some of the wares, when he caught her paying particular attention to a beautiful dress. It was gold, beautifully embroidered, with a v-neckline. Making his way up behind her, she jumped slightly as he told her softly, “You’d look wonderful in that.”

“Oh... I just...” She seemed flustered and he couldn’t help but feel a small sense of triumph as he noticed the blush on her cheeks, “It’s much too expensive anyway.”

As she went to put it back, an opportunistic shop assistant joined them having overheard some of their conversation, “Your partner is right, miss. The color suits you... is there really any harm in trying it on?”

Her cheeks were fully rosy as she glanced at Harry and tried to stammer out a response, “He’s not... that’s just...”

“You know she’s right, Marls.” He swore he felt her shiver as she leaned in closer to tell her, “That dress would look wonderful on you at dinner.”

Her eyes widened, and he could see the gears turning in her head. Gently, she took the dress and said a tentative, “Alright.”

Following her to the fitting rooms, he sat himself down and told her, “I’ll be waiting right here.”

The assistant followed them, no doubt looking for a commission, and given the unintentional help she’d given him, he could very nearly hug her. The woman, probably in her mid-forties, commented as they waited, “You two make for a lovely couple.”

He grinned at her, speaking quietly enough that he was sure Marlene wouldn’t hear him, “Thank you, I like to think you’re right.”

“Oh, I am.” She insisted, “I see enough people walk through here to know when they fit. And the way you looked at her when she wasn’t looking... well you only see that on occasion, and she looked at you the same way.”

It was hard to know if that was true, especially considering how badly he wanted it to be true, but whatever his thoughts on the matter were quickly wiped from his mind as Marlene came walking out in that dress.

He was struck silent at the sight of her. The gown looked truly phenomenal on her. Just the right amount of cleavage tantalizingly on display, it tapered to hug her hips before flaring back out just below the knee.

Shyly, she came to stand in front of him and asked, “Well?”

Standing up, he offered his hand and had her make a little turn. Her hand was soft in his and when she came back around to look in his eyes, he breathed out almost reverently, “Gorgeous...”

Biting her bottom lip for just a moment, she beamed at him, “Thank you... but I still can’t...”

“No buts,” He brought a finger to her lips and her eyes were filled with something that he couldn’t wait to explore, “you’re getting it, and that’s final.”

“It would be criminal if you didn’t, miss.” The assistant chimed in.

Marlene nodded her head, still taken aback before she found her voice again, “I’ll just... go change back then.”

A few short minutes later, they made their way out of Herrods with their bags in tow, “We’ll just drop these things off at home and then make our way over to the restaurant. After you change of course.”

“I’d love to know where you’re taking me that you think I need something like **that**.” Her eyes were narrowed, curious.

“That’s for me to know and for you to find out, Marls.” When they arrived back, he hid his purchases in his room before making his way down to the living room.

He waited for Marlene to join him. When she did, he took a minute to appreciate the absolute vision of beauty again and told her, “You know that dress might’ve been a mistake.”

Her face fell, and her voice got small, “What?”

She had no reason to worry though, and he’d curse his godfather for creating such insecurity in her, “When a woman this gorgeous walks into the restaurant, there’s no way that anybody will be able to get any work done. Chef’s peaking out of the back of house, waiters tripping over each other. The wine stains alone are going to cost them a fortune!”

The smile returned just as quickly as it disappeared as she poked him in the side, “That wasn’t nice, Harry. You had me worried there for a second.”

“I’ve gotta think of other people here, Marls, not just about myself.” His exaggerated sigh earned him another poke but he didn’t react before he offered his arm, “I guess we’ll just have to risk it.”

They walked together down Royal Hospital Road in Chelsea. He knew the exact moment the moment when she realized where they were going because her grip on his arm tightened in excitement, “Harry... are we?”

“Going to Gordon Ramsay’s? Yes.” It’d only just opened that year. Owned by an upcoming young chef from Scotland that had worked in some of the most prestigious restaurants in the world. He knew that Marlene had been dying to go there since it opened.

“I... you must be joking me? There’s no way!” She begged Sirius to make a reservation before their split, but he’d already become so dispossessed with it that he ignored her repeatedly.

“Just wait and see.” It was only a short walk from where they apparated to the door. It was a refined restaurant, the sort of thing that you would expect in that part of London. He caught a few of the men giving his date, as that’s how he saw her, an appreciative glance. *Look all you like, it won’t get you anywhere.*

It was nearly two hours later as Harry watched her bring a spoonful of souffle toward her lips. As she bit down on the delicious dessert, she hummed in appreciation, low in the back of her throat. He could tell from the way that she moved that she was tapping her feet in excitement. It made him smile, “That good?”

“It’s amazing.” Marlene gushed as she quickly took another bite. More sedately, Harry took a bit for himself as he watched her.

There was something incredibly endearing about her obvious excitement, “So, glad you finally got to try it?”

Her eyes were closed from savoring her latest bite, but they snapped open at his question. Setting her spoon down, she folded her hands in front of herself and looked at him perfectly serious, “This has been wonderful. I really couldn’t have wished for better company either.”

Harry had to fight down his blush, but it was hard given just how pleased he was, “I’m glad it lived up to your expectations.”

“That and more, Harry. Trust me.” She reached across the table and squeezed his hand. It took a great deal of effort on his part to act natural as he felt his heart thud in his chest hard enough that he was sure that she could hear it.

“We’ll have to make sure you make it back here again then.” Marlene just smiled as she brought another spoonful to her lips.

Time blurred for him as they finished up at the restaurant. He paid the bill and escorted his date out before they apparated away and he found himself walking down a cobblestone lane toward Marlene’s flat.

Her soft hand and was nestled in the crook of his arm, her cheek leaning against his shoulder. It wasn’t anything odd for them, he used to do the same thing to her when he was younger and when he finally outgrew her, the roles reversed.

They stopped together when they reached the door to her flat. She turned and looked up at him through her eyelashes. For a long moment, he felt like he couldn't breathe before she finally spoke, "Thank you for today, Harry. It was... perfect."

There were so many things that he wanted to tell her. She was the woman that he'd adored ever since he was old enough to understand his own feelings, and here he was right on the precipice. All he could think to do was agree with her, "It was."

She gave him a smile, but there was something else in it, just a hint of sadness, "You're going to make some lucky lady very happy one day."

The world stopped around him as he looked into her eyes. He knew that what he wanted to do was risky, that it could ruin everything long before it started, but after years of patience and that sad, vulnerable look in his eyes, he didn't want to wait anymore. There was a surprise whimper at the back of her throat as he leaned in to capture her lips with his own. Tingles of electricity shot down his spine as he felt her melt against him.

They spent seconds, minutes, or an eternity like that together. It was hard for him to say caught up in the moment.

And then it broke, and she was pulling away from him, breathless. They looked at each other, both reeling from the moment they shared before she spoke, full of worry, "That... that shouldn't have happened. I'm sorry... just... just don't tell your mum please! She'd kill me!"

It was hard for him to keep his composure given the monumental life event he just experienced, but he managed to put enough brain cells together to tell her, "You don't need to apologize, Marls. I was the one that kissed you."

He could see the gears in her mind working before she finally told him, "Then we both made a mistake! I... I just need to go." With a quick turn she opened the door behind her, but something made her hesitate before she closed behind her, "Thank you for tonight... I'll see you at Christmas..." With that she shut the door behind her, and Harry was left to stare at the dark, painted wood.

He knew that she would freak out, he was even expecting it. He'd spent years as a part of her life, and he knew her well enough to guess how she'd respond. But, he felt that undeniable connection, the one that made her hesitate at the door, and it gave him hope.

With a wide grin on his face, he turned down the lane and made his way down the street. As he apparated away, he was eagerly looking forward to Christmas.