

Father Patrick stared at Harry with the intensity of a man who was both a practitioner and a professional in holding grudges. Bellatrix placed a hand on Harry's shoulder, smiling as she guided him through the spacious interior of the church, along the aisle of pews, straight to the priest.

It was definitely the same man Harry had encountered during parking lot scuffles, once while picking up Astoria and another time when Father Patrick was reversing the church bus on the road.

"Ah, Bellatrix," Father Patrick said. "Is this your son?"

He asked the question with a level of mild disdain that would make a retired teacher proud. Father Patrick was the prototype of a priest in appearance—tall, bald, thin, and imposing with that wrath of God, repent-you-sinner look.

"This is Harry." Bellatrix affectionately squeezed his arm. "He recently got into a bit of legal trouble."

"I'm not surprised," Father Patrick said. "Well, it's nice to meet you, Harry."

Nothing in his tone made it sound nice, or even just nice.

"Likewise, Father," Harry said. "I think we've met before."

"He's willing to do whatever it takes to get back on track," his mother said. "The situation is complicated. I'm not sure I fully understand it myself, but his intentions weren't bad, just misguided."

"What crime was he accused of?" Father Patrick asked. "You didn't mention that on the phone."

"Shoplifting," Harry replied.

He expected the priest to condemn him or at least shake his head in disapproval, but Father Patrick responded with a small nod, merely acknowledging the information.

"This morning, I'm hosting a party for children, which will last until the afternoon," Father Patrick said. "You'll be helping clean up the mess they make. The church is an old building, and I don't want stains to have a chance to set in."

"That doesn't sound too hard."

Both Father Patrick and his mother laughed in a way that left Harry feeling a bit uneasy.

"I'll come back for you later today," his mother said. "Give it your best, sweetheart."

She kissed him on the cheek, making Harry conscious of her presence and how different it felt being the target of his mother's affection in a public place. Father Patrick waited patiently until she moved down the aisle before turning his attention back to Harry.

"I'll make this clear right from the start," the priest said. "If you want a positive recommendation from me, you'll need to meet my expectations."

"Should I give up now?" Harry asked.

"That's entirely up to you."

Father Patrick showed him a closet in the back of the room, which contained a mop, a vacuum cleaner, and various other cleaning supplies. The priest left him there as parents began arriving with their children. Harry was pleasantly surprised by how many attractive mothers he saw dropping off their little ones, but he couldn't do more than watch from a distance.

As more and more children arrived, the challenge of the task became clear. Seven dozen kids, aged five to seven, ran around, yelling at the top of their lungs, spilling juice cups, and dropping cupcakes, ensuring a mess he would have to clean up.

He felt humbled by the task as he watched one of the children drop a cupcake liner smeared with frosting directly onto the old wooden floor. He had to get on his hands and knees to clean it up, given the angle it fell under one of the pews. A child bumped into him, spilling juice on the back of his shirt.

Harry's anger flared, but he had nowhere to go, as the child fell on his little butt and started crying loudly. Ignoring his own wet and sticky shirt, he crouched down to address the damage.

"You okay, buddy?" he said. "You just fell, it's alright. No big deal."

The little boy went from crying to laughing. "I tricked you."

"Yeah, you got me." Harry forced a smile as the boy ran off.

"There!" Father Patrick's voice was a sharp, unwelcome crack in his ear. "One of the children had an upset stomach and vomited in the corner."

Harry cleaned up and then washed up in the bathroom. He barely resisted the urge to scribble '666' on the mirror with soap.

The rest of his community service that day proceeded in the same labor-intensive and somewhat humiliating manner. By the end, he was exhausted, but thankfully, so were the children. Parents began picking them up around their usual naptime, with most yawning or demanding to be carried.

"You're free to go," Father Patrick said. "I'd appreciate it if you were less stubborn in your work next time."

Next time? Harry had hoped this was a one-time thing.

"I'll do my best, Father," he said through gritted teeth.

He found his mother waiting for him outside the church, looking unbothered. Two of the fathers of the little monsters he had cleaned up after were talking to her in a seemingly friendly manner.

Harry knew exactly what they were up to, considering his mother's appearance. He walked up to her and moved close.

"Mom," he said. "Ready to go?"

"My son Harry helped me all day," Bellatrix said.

"Wow! You're way too young to have a son his age," one of the men smiled as Bellatrix pretended to laugh at the lukewarm compliment.

"We should go, Mom," Harry said, bordering on irritation.

"If you want to hear more about the planning committee I mentioned, can I give you a call?" the other man suggested.

"No, I don't think so." Bellatrix smiled and stepped back. "Goodbye. Have a nice day."

Harry waited until they were both in the car before expressing his thoughts. "Those guys were absolutely shameless."

"They were just being friendly," Bellatrix said.

"You're married," he pointed out.

His mother didn't respond immediately. He wondered if he had inadvertently touched a sore spot, considering how rarely his absent father was home. He wanted to change the subject for her sake, but she did it first. "How did it go?" she asked.

"Not great, but I survived," he said. "Father Patrick suggested I've volunteered for another round?"

"Same time tomorrow. Trust me, it will help your situation. On that note, we're not going straight home. We need to go to my office."

"Do you have an appointment you forgot?"

"In a way." Bellatrix glanced at him, smiling in a way that did beautiful things to her face.

"Remember I mentioned I want you to talk to someone about the challenges you're facing now that you're back home? Well, I've scheduled that."

He sighed, though he wasn't entirely opposed to it, just tired from dealing with kids. "Alright. Can I at least lie down on one of those therapy couches?"

"Of course. I just got a new one."

Harry had never seen his mother's office before, as he had left home before she changed jobs.

He was surprised at how nice the building looked from the outside.

It was in a part of town he always associated with high-end professionals, lawyers, and real estate agents. The office itself was on the third floor and had a modern, sleek look, complete with a reception area, though it currently lacked a receptionist.

"It's just me," Bellatrix said. "I haven't hired a receptionist yet since I usually don't have more than one or two patients a day."

"Even so," Harry said. "I didn't expect it to look so much like a prototypical therapist's office."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He shrugged, pondering it himself. "I guess I'm just so used to seeing you as a mom, and before that as a yoga instructor, that I never fully realized you're a career woman now."

"I wasn't a career woman before when I taught yoga and did massages?"

"You know what I mean," he said.

"I wonder if you do." She smiled good-naturedly, opening the door to her office. "Come on in, Harry. Sit down. Make yourself comfortable."

He entered the room, which was nice and spacious, with a classic therapist's couch, a desk, and a small coffee table on one side. Bellatrix closed the door and, in a move that slightly surprised him, locked it behind her.

"I always lock the door, just in case," she said. "It still opens from the inside, but some of my patients feel more comfortable knowing no one from outside can just barge in during their confession."

"I understand."

He hesitated, recalling what Daphne had told him the previous night. His mother, according to his older sister, was a sex therapist. A strange stir of emotions arose within him, and questions he didn't dare voice out loud filled his mind.

He sat on the couch and tucked his legs under him. His mother was silent, turning on her computer, and a peculiar tension settled into the empty space.

"So... what should I talk about?" he asked.

Bellatrix looked at him and clasped her hands. "Whatever you want. It's hard to switch roles from mother to therapist. I want to help you as a professional, Harry, but I also worry about you. I don't want you to feel like you're being interrogated or that I'm trying to uncover your secrets."

"I don't feel that way, at least not yet," he said. "I guess I just feel... a bit overwhelmed. Still adjusting to being back home."

"I've noticed." Bellatrix walked over to her desk and sat on it, crossing her legs, causing her skirt to ride up slightly, revealing a bit of leg. "It must be a big change for you, right?"

"Yes, absolutely. School was different. Simpler in some ways."

"I can imagine adjusting to the amount of... feminine energy in our house took some work on your part."

He froze, then tried to act naturally in a way that wasn't natural at all. "I suppose you could say that."

"I haven't really asked you much about your life at MACUSA, Harry," Bellatrix said. "Do you mind if I do?"

"Not at all, Mom. I'm an open book."

That was a lie, but he wanted it to be true.

"Did you date much at school?" Bellatrix asked.

"Quite a bit," he said. "At least a little. I had a girlfriend. We... broke up right after graduation."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," Bellatrix said. "That must have been tough for you. Was it during the summer?"

"Yeah, in the middle of summer."

"Did that partly motivate you to come back home?"

He nodded slowly, though he wasn't sure he liked the conclusion she drew. "Is that so strange? I was an emotional wreck. I didn't want to live in a city where I no longer had a reason to be, with the chance of running into her."

"But when you came back home, it was a new situation, or at least a changed one," Bellatrix said. "With Astoria, grown up and still chasing your attention. With Daphne, flaunting her wild side and pushing all your buttons."

"Mom," he said. "I love you, but what are you getting at?"

She smiled and adjusted her glasses, one of her crossed legs shifting in an interesting way that Harry tried not to notice.

"I've seen the way you look at them, Harry." She raised her hand to forestall his excuse. "Not all the time. I don't want this to sound like an accusation; it's just an observation."

"Have you seen how little Daphne wears half the time?" he said defensively. "Astoria's not much better, but it's harder to blame her for that."

Bellatrix let out a single laugh. "I love seeing you and Astoria get along so well. Almost too well." His expression remained neutral. "Do you want me to be meaner to her? What are you trying to say, Mom?"

"On the other hand, you and Daphne seem... tense around each other." Bellatrix's smile faded.

"I'm not sure that's the right word. I sense tension between you two. Which brings me to shoplifting."

Harry stiffened but didn't avoid her gaze. "I've already begun my penance. I'm not sure what else you want from me."

"The truth, Harry. Did Daphne have any part in it?"

He hadn't expected how hard it would be to lie straight to his mother's face. That fact made the situation feel unfair, an interrogation under the guise of therapy.

"She's my sister," he said, anger creeping into his voice. "If she were involved, and I'm not saying she was, I'd protect her. I love her too much to throw her under the bus."

"I'm not accusing you of anything, Harry," she said, raising a placating hand. "More so, I'm worried about her. If she's somehow dragging you into this, or worse, if she promised you something in return... I need to know."

"What could Daphne possibly have that I'd want badly enough to face legal consequences in exchange?"

He asked the question mockingly and instantly regretted it, hearing how it sounded, especially in light of his mother's earlier remarks. Fortunately, she seemed just as uncomfortable. She cleared her throat and stood up.

"I'm just worried about both of you," she said. "I'm sorry for my prying questions. It's a bad habit I need to break as a therapist."

"As a sex therapist." Harry shifted in his seat. "Daphne mentioned it to me yesterday. That you're a sex therapist."

He suddenly remembered the Magic Pulse and wondered if now was the time for his own investigation. Formulating this particular thought brought a strange tingle of excitement and made the room feel a bit smaller.

"Well, that is... not really that simple." She blushed and shook her head, clearly flustered. "Yes, I have a few patients who come to me for help with issues related to sex or intimacy in their lives, but it's not like I advertise it as my specialty. I don't turn away patients when I have openings, and I always have openings, given that I'm still starting out."

"I'm not judging you, Mom," he said. "I just feel that if you're demanding honesty from me, I should get it in return."

"That's fair, except that my demand for honesty is being blocked by your loyalty to your sister," Bellatrix said. She let out a small, weary chuckle and shook her head. "Look. I just want you to know that you can come to me with any problem, Harry. Whether it's about your sisters or something more related to my specialty. I'm here if you need me."

She held his gaze, and the room suddenly felt warm. He wanted so badly to ask about the Magic Pulse, certain it was her doing, perhaps in some way related to her therapy. She smiled in a way that seemed to almost beg him to ask the question.

The phone in the waiting room suddenly rang. Bellatrix opened the door in time to answer on the fourth ring. She frowned as she listened to the caller.

"What's going on?" Harry asked.

"It was Daphne and Astoria, talking over each other," Bellatrix said. "I'm not entirely sure, but something happened at home. There's no power."

"That's strange."

"Come on," Bellatrix said. "We should head back home."