

“Right,” Harry said, “I’ve changed my mind, I’m staying.”

He flung himself down at the kitchen table and faced Dudley and Aunt Petunia. The Dursleys appeared taken aback at his abrupt change of mind. Aunt Petunia glanced despairingly at Uncle Vernon. The vein in Uncle Vernon’s purple temple was throbbing worse than ever.

“Who are all these ruddy owls from?” he growled.

“The first one was from the Ministry of Magic, expelling me,” said Harry calmly; he was straining his ears to catch noises outside in case the Ministry representatives were approaching, and it was easier and quieter to answer Uncle Vernon’s questions than to have him start raging and bellowing. “The second one was from my friend Ron’s dad, he works at the Ministry.”

“*Ministry of Magic?*” bellowed Uncle Vernon. “People like you in *government*? Oh this explains everything, everything, no wonder the country’s going to the dogs . . .”

When Harry did not respond, Uncle Vernon glared at him, then spat, “And why have you been expelled?”

“Because I did magic.”

“AHA!” roared Uncle Vernon, slamming his fist down on the top of the fridge, which sprang open; several of Dudley’s low-fat snacks toppled out and burst on the floor. “So you admit it! *What did you do to Dudley?*”

“Nothing,” said Harry, slightly less calmly. “That wasn’t me —”

“*Was,*” muttered Dudley unexpectedly, and Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia instantly made flapping gestures at Harry to quiet him while they both bent low over Dudley.

“Go on, son,” said Uncle Vernon, “what did he do?”

“Tell us, darling,” whispered Aunt Petunia.

“Pointed his wand at me,” Dudley mumbled.

“Yeah, I did, but I didn’t use —” Harry began angrily, but . . .

“SHUT UP!” roared Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia in unison. “Go on,

son,” repeated Uncle Vernon, mustache blowing about furiously.

“All dark,” Dudley said hoarsely, shuddering. “Everything dark. And then I h-heard . . . *things*. Inside m-my head . . .”

Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia exchanged looks of utter horror. If their least favorite thing in the world was magic, closely followed by neighbors who cheated more than they did on the hosepipe ban, people who heard voices were definitely in the bottom ten. They obviously thought Dudley was losing his mind.

“What sort of things did you hear, popkin?” breathed Aunt Petunia, very white-faced and with tears in her eyes.

But Dudley seemed incapable of saying. He shuddered again and shook his large blond head, and despite the sense of numb dread that had settled on Harry since the arrival of the first owl, he felt a certain curiosity. Dementors caused a person to relive the worst moments of their life. . . . What would spoiled, pampered, bullying Dudley have been forced to hear?

“How come you fell over, son?” said Uncle Vernon in an unnaturally quiet voice, the kind of voice he would adopt at the bedside of a very ill person.

“T-tripped,” said Dudley shakily. “And then —”

He gestured at his massive chest. Harry understood: Dudley was remembering the clammy cold that filled the lungs as hope and happiness were sucked out of you.

“Horrible,” croaked Dudley. “Cold. Really cold.”

“Okay,” said Uncle Vernon in a voice of forced calm, while Aunt Petunia laid an anxious hand on Dudley’s forehead to feel his temperature. “What happened then, Dudders?”

“Felt . . . felt . . . felt . . . as if . . . as if . . .”

“As if you’d never be happy again,” Harry supplied tonelessly.

“Yes,” Dudley whispered, still trembling.

“So,” said Uncle Vernon, voice restored to full and considerable volume as he straightened up. “So you put some crackpot spell on my son so he’d hear

voices and believe he was — was doomed to misery, or something, did you?”

“How many times do I have to tell you?” said Harry, temper and voice rising together. “*It wasn’t me!* It was a couple of dementors!”

“A couple of — what’s this codswallop?”

“De — men — tors,” said Harry slowly and clearly. “Two of them.”

“And what the ruddy hell are dementors?”

“They guard the wizard prison, Azkaban,” said Aunt Petunia.

Two seconds’ ringing silence followed these words and then Aunt Petunia clapped her hand over her mouth as though she had let slip a disgusting swear word. Uncle Vernon was goggling at her. Harry’s brain reeled. Mrs. Figg was one thing — but *Aunt Petunia*?

“How d’you know that?” he asked her, astonished.

Aunt Petunia looked quite appalled with herself. She glanced at Uncle Vernon in fearful apology, then lowered her hand slightly to reveal her horsey teeth.

“I heard — that awful boy — telling *her* about them — years ago,” she said jerkily.

“If you mean my mum and dad, why don’t you use their names?” said Harry loudly, but Aunt Petunia ignored him. She seemed horribly flustered.

Harry was stunned. Except for one outburst years ago, in the course of which Aunt Petunia had screamed that Harry’s mother had been a freak, he had never heard her mention her sister. He was astounded that she had remembered this scrap of information about the magical world for so long, when she usually put all her energies into pretending it didn’t exist.

Uncle Vernon opened his mouth, closed it again, opened it once more, shut it, then, apparently struggling to remember how to talk, opened it for a third time and croaked, “So — so — they — er — they — er — they actually exist, do they — er — dementy-whatsits?”

Aunt Petunia nodded.

Uncle Vernon looked from Aunt Petunia to Dudley to Harry as if hoping somebody was going to shout “April Fool!” When nobody did, he opened his mouth yet again, but was spared the struggle to find more words by the arrival of the third owl of the evening, which zoomed through the still-open window like a feathery cannonball and landed with a clatter on the kitchen table, causing all three of the Dursleys to jump with fright. Harry tore a second official-looking envelope from the owl’s beak and ripped it open as the owl swooped back out into the night.

“Enough — effing — *owls* . . .” muttered Uncle Vernon distractedly, stomping over to the window and slamming it shut again.

Dear Mr. Potter,

Further to our letter of approximately twenty-two minutes ago, the Ministry of Magic has revised its decision to destroy your wand forthwith. You may retain your wand until your disciplinary hearing on 12th August, at which time an official decision will be taken.

Following discussions with the headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the Ministry has agreed that the question of your expulsion will also be decided at that time. You should therefore consider yourself suspended from school pending further inquiries.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Magalda Hopkirk". The ink is dark and the signature is fluid, with a large initial 'M' and a long, sweeping 'k'.

IMPROPER USE OF MAGIC OFFICE

Ministry of Magic

Harry read this letter through three times in quick succession. The miserable knot in his chest loosened slightly at the thought that he was not definitely expelled, though his fears were by no means banished. Everything seemed to hang on this hearing on the twelfth of August.

“Well?” said Uncle Vernon, recalling Harry to his surroundings. “What

now? Have they sentenced you to anything? Do your lot have the death penalty?" he added as a hopeful afterthought.

"I've got to go to a hearing," said Harry.

"And they'll sentence you there?"

"I suppose so."

"I won't give up hope, then," said Uncle Vernon nastily.

"Well, if that's all," said Harry, getting to his feet. He was desperate to be alone, to think, perhaps to send a letter to Ron, Hermione, or Sirius.

"NO, IT RUDDY WELL IS NOT ALL!" bellowed Uncle Vernon. "SIT BACK DOWN!"

"What *now*?" said Harry impatiently.

"DUDLEY!" roared Uncle Vernon. "I want to know exactly what happened to my son!"

"FINE!" yelled Harry, and in his temper, red and gold sparks shot out of the end of his wand, still clutched in his hand. All three Dursleys flinched, looking terrified.

"Dudley and I were in the alleyway between Magnolia Crescent and Wisteria Walk," said Harry, speaking fast, fighting to control his temper. "Dudley thought he'd be smart with me, I pulled out my wand but didn't use it. Then two dementors turned up —"

"But what ARE dementoids?" asked Uncle Vernon furiously. "What do they DO?"

"I told you — they suck all the happiness out of you," said Harry, "and if they get the chance, they kiss you —"

"Kiss you?" said Uncle Vernon, his eyes popping slightly. "*Kiss* you?"

"It's what they call it when they suck the soul out of your mouth."

Aunt Petunia uttered a soft scream.

"His *soul*? They didn't take — he's still got his —"

She seized Dudley by the shoulders and shook him, as though testing to see whether she could hear his soul rattling around inside him.

“Of course they didn’t get his soul, you’d know if they had,” said Harry, exasperated.

“Fought ’em off, did you, son?” said Uncle Vernon loudly, with the appearance of a man struggling to bring the conversation back onto a plane he understood. “Gave ’em the old one-two, did you?”

“You can’t give a dementor *the old one-two*,” said Harry through clenched teeth.

“Why’s he all right, then?” blustered Uncle Vernon. “Why isn’t he all empty, then?”

“Because I used the Patronus —”

WHOOSH. With a clattering, a whirring of wings, and a soft fall of dust, a fourth owl came shooting out of the kitchen fireplace.

“FOR GOD’S SAKE!” roared Uncle Vernon, pulling great clumps of hair out of his mustache, something he hadn’t been driven to in a long time. “I WILL NOT HAVE OWLS HERE, I WILL NOT TOLERATE THIS, I TELL YOU!”

But Harry was already pulling a roll of parchment from the owl’s leg. He was so convinced that this letter had to be from Dumbledore, explaining everything — the dementors, Mrs. Figg, what the Ministry was up to, how he, Dumbledore, intended to sort everything out — that for the first time in his life he was disappointed to see Sirius’s handwriting. Ignoring Uncle Vernon’s ongoing rant about owls and narrowing his eyes against a second cloud of dust as the most recent owl took off back up the chimney, Harry read Sirius’s message.

*Arthur’s just told us what happened.
Don’t leave the house again, whatever you do.*

Harry found this such an inadequate response to everything that had happened tonight that he turned the piece of parchment over, looking for the rest of the letter, but there was nothing there.

And now his temper was rising again. Wasn't *anybody* going to say "well done" for fighting off two dementors single-handedly? Both Mr. Weasley and Sirius were acting as though he'd misbehaved and they were saving their tellings-off until they could ascertain how much damage had been done.

"— a peck, I mean, pack of owls shooting in and out of my house and I won't have it, boy, I won't —"

"I can't stop the owls coming," Harry snapped, crushing Sirius's letter in his fist.

"I want the truth about what happened tonight!" barked Uncle Vernon. "If it was demenders who hurt Dudley, how come you've been expelled? You did you-know-what, you've admitted it!"

Harry took a deep, steadying breath. His head was beginning to ache again. He wanted more than anything to get out of the kitchen, away from the Dursleys.

"I did the Patronus Charm to get rid of the dementors," he said, forcing himself to remain calm. "It's the only thing that works against them."

"But what were dementoids *doing* in Little Whinging?" said Uncle Vernon in tones of outrage.

"Couldn't tell you," said Harry wearily. "No idea."

His head was pounding in the glare of the strip lighting now. His anger was ebbing away. He felt drained, exhausted. The Dursleys were all staring at him.

"It's you," said Uncle Vernon forcefully. "It's got something to do with you, boy, I know it. Why else would they turn up here? Why else would they be down that alleyway? You've got to be the only — the only —" Evidently he couldn't bring himself to say the word "wizard." "The only *you-know-what* for miles."

"I don't know why they were here . . ."

But at these words of Uncle Vernon's, Harry's exhausted brain ground back into action. Why *had* the dementors come to Little Whinging? How *could* it be coincidence that they had arrived in the alleyway where Harry was? Had they been sent? Had the Ministry of Magic lost control of the dementors, had they deserted Azkaban and joined Voldemort, as Dumbledore had predicted they would?

"These demembers guard some weirdos' prison?" said Uncle Vernon, lumbering in the wake of Harry's train of thought.

"Yes," said Harry.

If only his head would stop hurting, if only he could just leave the kitchen and get to his dark bedroom and *think*. . . .

"Oho! They were coming to arrest you!" said Uncle Vernon, with the triumphant air of a man reaching an unassailable conclusion. "That's it, isn't it, boy? You're on the run from the law!"

"Of course I'm not," said Harry, shaking his head as though to scare off a fly, his mind racing now.

"Then why — ?"

"He must have sent them," said Harry quietly, more to himself than to Uncle Vernon.

"What's that? Who must have sent them?"

"Lord Voldemort," said Harry.

He registered dimly how strange it was that the Dursleys, who flinched, winced, and squawked if they heard words like "wizard," "magic," or "wand," could hear the name of the most evil wizard of all time without the slightest tremor.

"Lord — hang on," said Uncle Vernon, his face screwed up, a look of dawning comprehension in his piggy eyes. "I've heard that name . . . that was the one who . . ."

"Murdered my parents, yes," Harry said.

"But he's gone," said Uncle Vernon impatiently, without the slightest sign

that the murder of Harry's parents might be a painful topic to anybody. "That giant bloke said so. He's gone."

"He's back," said Harry heavily.

It felt very strange to be standing here in Aunt Petunia's surgically clean kitchen, beside the top-of-the-range fridge and the wide-screen television, and talking calmly of Lord Voldemort to Uncle Vernon. The arrival of the dementors in Little Whinging seemed to have caused a breach in the great, invisible wall that divided the relentlessly non-magical world of Privet Drive and the world beyond. Harry's two lives had somehow become fused and everything had been turned upside down: The Dursleys were asking for details about the magical world and Mrs. Figg knew Albus Dumbledore; dementors were soaring around Little Whinging and he might never go back to Hogwarts. Harry's head throbbed more painfully.

"Back?" whispered Aunt Petunia.

She was looking at Harry as she had never looked at him before. And all of a sudden, for the very first time in his life, Harry fully appreciated that Aunt Petunia was his mother's sister. He could not have said why this hit him so very powerfully at this moment. All he knew was that he was not the only person in the room who had an inkling of what Lord Voldemort being back might mean. Aunt Petunia had never in her life looked at him like that before. Her large, pale eyes (so unlike her sister's) were not narrowed in dislike or anger: They were wide and fearful. The furious pretense that Aunt Petunia had maintained all Harry's life — that there was no magic and no world other than the world she inhabited with Uncle Vernon — seemed to have fallen away.

"Yes," Harry said, talking directly to Aunt Petunia now. "He came back a month ago. I saw him."

Her hands found Dudley's massive leather-clad shoulders and clutched them.

"Hang on," said Uncle Vernon, looking from his wife to Harry and back again, apparently dazed and confused by the unprecedented understanding that seemed to have sprung up between them. "Hang on. This Lord

Voldything's back, you say."

"Yes."

"The one who murdered your parents."

"Yes."

"And now he's sending dismembers after you?"

"Looks like it," said Harry.

"I see," said Uncle Vernon, looking from his white-faced wife to Harry and hitching up his trousers. He seemed to be swelling, his great purple face stretching before Harry's eyes. "Well, that settles it," he said, his shirt front straining as he inflated himself, "*you can get out of this house, boy!*"

"What?" said Harry.

"You heard me — OUT!" Uncle Vernon bellowed, and even Aunt Petunia and Dudley jumped. "OUT! OUT! I should've done it years ago! Owls treating the place like a rest home, puddings exploding, half the lounge destroyed, Dudley's tail, Marge bobbing around on the ceiling, and that flying Ford Anglia — OUT! OUT! You've had it! You're history! You're not staying here if some loony's after you, you're not endangering my wife and son, you're not bringing trouble down on us, if you're going the same way as your useless parents, I've had it! OUT!"

Harry stood rooted to the spot. The letters from the Ministry, Mr. Weasley, and Sirius were crushed in his left hand. *Don't leave the house again, whatever you do. DO NOT LEAVE YOUR AUNT AND UNCLE'S HOUSE.*

"You heard me!" said Uncle Vernon, bending forward now, so that his massive purple face came closer to Harry's, so that Harry actually felt flecks of spit hit his face. "Get going! You were all keen to leave half an hour ago! I'm right behind you! Get out and never darken our doorstep again! Why we ever kept you in the first place I don't know. Marge was right, it should have been the orphanage, we were too damn soft for our own good, thought we could squash it out of you, thought we could turn you normal, but you've been rotten from the beginning, and I've had enough — OWLS!"

The fifth owl zoomed down the chimney so fast it actually hit the floor before zooming into the air again with a loud screech. Harry raised his hand to seize the letter, which was in a scarlet envelope, but it soared straight over his head, flying directly at Aunt Petunia, who let out a scream and ducked, her arms over her face. The owl dropped the red envelope on her head, turned, and flew straight up the chimney again.

Harry darted forward to pick up the letter, but Aunt Petunia beat him to it.

“You can open it if you like,” said Harry, “but I’ll hear what it says anyway. That’s a Howler.”

“Let go of it, Petunia!” roared Uncle Vernon. “Don’t touch it, it could be dangerous!”

“It’s addressed to me,” said Aunt Petunia in a shaking voice. “It’s addressed to *me*, Vernon, look! *Mrs. Petunia Dursley, The Kitchen, Number Four, Privet Drive —*”

She caught her breath, horrified. The red envelope had begun to smoke.

“Open it!” Harry urged her. “Get it over with! It’ll happen anyway —”

“No —”

Aunt Petunia’s hand was trembling. She looked wildly around the kitchen as though looking for an escape route, but too late — the envelope burst into flames. Aunt Petunia screamed and dropped it.

An awful voice filled the kitchen, echoing in the confined space, issuing from the burning letter on the table.

“*REMEMBER MY LAST, PETUNIA.*”

Aunt Petunia looked as though she might faint. She sank into the chair beside Dudley, her face in her hands. The remains of the envelope smoldered into ash in the silence.

“What is this?” Uncle Vernon said hoarsely. “What — I don’t — Petunia?”

Aunt Petunia said nothing. Dudley was staring stupidly at his mother, his mouth hanging open. The silence spiraled horribly. Harry was watching his aunt, utterly bewildered, his head throbbing fit to burst.